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WINTER TOUR FOR DEREK AND JOHN

JANUARY 2008

(with Karin and Brennan joining on Days 2,3 and 4)

By Martin Kelsey

ITINERARY

Day 1: Sunday 20th January

Pick-up Madrid: 13.30

Arrocampo

Arrive at Casa Rural El Recuerdo by 19.00

Day 2: Monday 21st January

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

Day 3: Tuesday 22nd January

Monfragüe National Park

Day 4: Wednesday 23rd January

Plains west of Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca, Monfragüe

Day 5: Thursday 24th January

Llanos de Belén and River Tozo. Return to Madrid for check-in at 18.45.

TRIP REPORT

Day 1: Sunday 20th January

Derek and John were met at 13.30, a few minutes later than expected thanks to a piece of luggage that had disappeared momentarily behind the conveyor belt. We set off from Madrid in glorious sunshine and mild conditions, down the motorway towards Extremadura. Stopping just outside Madrid, we had rolls with

the fillings of our choice at a local bar-cum-service station. Back on the road, suitably refreshed, we saw the snow-capped Gredos mountains to the north as we headed into the afternoon sun. A few **White Stork** and a **Red Kite** was seen on the journey. We stopped at Arrocampo, the vegetation fringed reservoir built to provide cooling water for a power station. At the first observation point, we saw wheeling **Griffon** and **Black Vulture**, and an individual of the latter species on the ground as well, along with **Marsh Harrier**. We checked out a pool set in the dehesa woodland, which had a couple of **Purple Swamphen**, **Great White Egret**, **Little Egret**, an array of ducks and waders, such as **Teal**, **Shoveler**, **Mallard**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Greenshank**, as well as **Kingfisher** and **Grey Wagtail**. We spent longer standing on the ramp of a hide beside the main body of water, where good views were obtained of **Purple Swamphen**, a **Water Pipit** was present and the snipping call of **Bluethroat** was heard, although the bird in question remained elusive. **Cetti's Warbler** sang from the vegetation, and we also saw **Zitting Cisticola** and **Spanish Sparrow**. Finally, to complete the visit, we returned to our first stop where well over a hundred **Magpies** were assembling for their roost, as flocks of **Jackdaw** passed overhead. The sun was close to setting as we set off for the final leg of the journey, reaching Casa Rural El Recuerdo by 19.00, ready for the evening meal and then the day's tally as we sat by the log fire.

Day 2: Monday 21st January

Joined by Karin and Brennan, we set off south after breakfast, passing through Zorita and then beside a region of steppe before reaching the large area of irrigated land, largely dedicated to rice production, but with some maize and fruit trees as well. It was a wonderfully clear, warm morning and the day got progressively warmer, becoming spring-like. Beside the village of Palazuelo we stopped to scan the rice fields before us. A group of **Little Ringed Plover** fed on the damp mud in a close-by field and a **Water Pipit** was quickly glimpsed. Small family groups of **Common Cranes** were scattered across middle-distance and a **Cetti's Warbler** sang close by. **Chiffchaffs** actively searched for insects close to the edge of water and sometimes flitted upwards to catch prey in mid-flight. Driving east of the village, we made several stops to enjoy our first closer views of **Common Crane**, some feeding beside **White Stork** in the rice stubble. A distant male **Hen Harrier** quartered the cultivation and a small flock of passage **Black-tailed Godwits** were seen in flight. Stopping beside the River Ruercas, we watched a group of at least 40 **Azure-winged Magpies** stream into a field of maize stubble. A few **Siskins** flew overhead and further along a track beside more maize stubble we found groups of **Brambling** amongst **Spanish Sparrows**.

Leaving that zone, we stopped at a point overlooking the Sierra Brava reservoir. Distant duck (**Gadwall**, **Shoveler**, **Mallard** and a few **Pintail**) rested on the millpond calm water, but much closer to us was a **Black-necked Grebe**. Several **Red Kites** and then an overwintering **Black Kite** was seen, as well as a tight flock of **Golden Plover**. But perhaps most extraordinary of all was an exceptionally early **Bath White** butterfly. A second was seen as we drove away. Our next stop was an area known for a winter roost of **Stone Curlew** and about

15 were in view, standing or sitting with eyes half-closed on a stony bank, now starting to shimmer slightly with the warmth.

We explored the Vegas Altas region, south of Madrigalejo, stopping for lunch in an area of arable cultivation, eating our sandwiches as we watched 12 **Great Bustard** on a hillside. Another white butterfly was seen, this time not close enough to identify. Groups of **Red Avadavats** bounced in front of us in small flocks as we drove slowly along the dirt tracks.

Finally, we entered another area of rice cultivation known as Casas del Hito. Water Crowfoot flowers were out on roadside pools and we had a second surprise of the day: a **Clouded Yellow** butterfly, also extremely early. **Southern Grey Shrike** appeared quite common, groups of **Spanish Sparrow** adorned the fences and a pair of **Tree Sparrow** was seen. Out on the rice fields we found **Common Crane** in larger flocks and also saw both male and ring-tail **Hen Harrier**, **Marsh Harrier** and a few **Grey Lag Geese**. We spent the afternoon slowly exploring the area, finishing up at a point from which we could watch the **Common Cranes** assembling in huge flocks, some over a thousand strong, as they gathered to roost. A distant **Black-winged Kite** hovered over the stubble and flocks of **Black-headed Gulls** and **Grey Lag Geese** headed to the Sierra Brava reservoir to roost. A delightful **Little Owl** appeared on a nearby tree and watched us motionless for easily half an hour. As we drove back after sunset, two more **Little Owls** were seen. Just before rejoining the main road, we paused to look at the large **Cattle Egret** roost, with hundreds of hunched white shapes chattering to each other.

Day 3: Tuesday 22nd January

An early morning walk near the house produced **Hoopoe**, **Serin**, **Spanish** and **House Sparrow**, **Short-toed Treecreeper** and **Black Redstart**. It was a clear and sunny morning as we set off towards Trujillo and thence across the granite outcrops and dropping into the dehesa oak woodland, on our way to the Monfragüe National Park. Just south of Torrejon El Rubio, we hit a bank of fog which persisted for the rest of our journey. We climbed to the castle in Monfragüe, with the ceiling of the fog tantalisingly close. We then stopped at the famous Peña Falcon **Griffon Vulture** colony, which was also shrouded in fog, so that only a few close perched vultures could be seen. However, we did have a superb view of a singing **Hawfinch**, perched close to the top of a tree close to the layby. There was also a **Blue Rock Thrush** and a multitude of **Blackcaps** and **Chiffchaffs**. As we continued, after coffee, towards the centre of the park, the fog thickened, so we retreated to the road below the castle, which by now was enjoying full sunshine. There was an incredible sight of the fog rolling over the escarpment and lying like a huge dollop of candyfloss in the gorge, whilst above us was a clear blue sky. Where rocks were exposed to the sun, the **Griffon Vultures** were lifting and joining a large spiralling group. We decided that this was the best place to position ourselves and lunch was organised. No sooner had we food in our mouths than two **Bonelli's Eagles** appeared and we enjoyed extraordinarily good views of them circling with the **Griffon Vultures**, in perfect sunshine. Eventually they glided eastwards, but instead of disappearing they settled on the rocks of the escarpment. This gave us a chance to watch

them at rest. After a few minutes, the birds got closer and a copulation was seen. Thereafter, they rested in the sunshine, throughout the entire duration of our lunch stop. The stop proved productive for other birds as well: a single **House Martin** was seen and we had good views of **Black Vulture**, whilst a **Woodlark** sang overhead.

With the mist seemingly breaking up, we decided to return to the park. We stopped for a few minutes in a belt of pines, hearing **Crested Tit** and having more sightings of **Hawfinches**, which appeared to be in considerable numbers there.

We then continued to the gorge at the Portilla del Tietár, but this was where the remaining fog persisted and it seemed likely to be staying put there for the rest of the day. We enjoyed a walk in cork oak dehesa: a beautiful habitat with large, well-spaced trees with a mist making things almost ethereal. Although small birds were few and far between, we did see a **Firecrest**, two **Short-toed Treecreepers** and many titmice and **Chiffchaffs**. At 5pm we decided to call it a day for Monfragüe and headed back to Trujillo, the entire journey through sunlit dehesa! After a brief stop in Trujillo to buy some local produce, we went to Pago de San Clemente and took the dirt track to an area favoured by **Long-eared Owl**. We did not have to wait long to see an owl fly into a pine and shortly after it started its soft hooting, almost like the sound of someone breathing heavily in their sleep. A second bird started calling nearby and then the first bird was seen again to leave the tree, producing its wing-clapping display. It was a special end to a day, which although frustrated by the weather, still managed to produce some outstanding sightings.

Day 4: Wednesday 23rd January

Another fine, warm and sunny day. Our first stop was a small reservoir on the outskirts of Trujillo where a small group of **Black-winged Stilts** fed at its margin and **Mallard** and **Shoveler** were lit up beautifully in the morning sun. The sunlight helped us at our next stop on the edge of the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca, where the white bellies of **Little Bustards** were our first cue to locate this wintering flock of about 90 birds as they fed and rested on a gentle slope. From the same vantage point we watched a group of about six **Rock Sparrows** and then had absolutely superb views of a pair of **Great Spotted Cuckoo** which appeared almost out of nowhere and then flew within feet from us. There were also flocks of **Linnet**, **Corn Buntings** and **Woodlark** sang, and **Crested Lark** were found on the track before us. Taking the road a few hundred metres more, we stopped near a roadside pool where nearly 150 **Golden Plover** and a small number of **Lapwing** rested. However, the main attraction here were three **Great Bustard**, fairly close on the skyline, in perfect light conditions. The plumage detail that could be seen was superb. At one point the largest male initiated the early stages of display: dropping its wings and seemingly expanding its bulk. It was a magnificent sight. Eventually they flew off in different directions, one coming so close that it almost filled the field of view of our binoculars! Calls of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** could be heard and soon a dispersed flock appeared, flying high, in twos and threes calling and circling around.

We made another stop a little further along, on high ground offering a panoramic view. We located a group of about 40 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** on the ground and although distant, their plumage features could be seen. A **Great Bustard** stood on the skyline and a very distant group of five **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** were also seen briefly in flight.

After coffee in the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, we visited the Rio Tamuja briefly where the wooded slope opposite seemed alive with **Hawfinches**, although all were elusive. **Crag Martins** wheeled above us. We then drove north and stopped at the Rio Almonte for a short walk and lunch. The highlights here included good views of a pair of **Black Wheatear** and very early **Wall** and **Small Copper** butterflies.

Thence back to Monfragüe to the Portilla del Tietár, which, unlike yesterday, was clear of mist and bathing in afternoon sunshine. **Griffon Vultures** were incubating on their nests and on the same cliff face early Pallid Narcissus was flowering in clumps in sheltered spots. Although a single distant call of **Eagle Owl** was heard mid-afternoon and the **Spanish Imperial Eagle** was also heard calling at a distance, it was not until dusk that things livened up. Two **Merlin** flew high overhead, presumably to roost. The eagle was heard calling again, and then a brief view was had of the bird flying to roost, somewhere on the other side of the crag. Then just before 19.00, an **Eagle Owl** was heard calling to our right and brief views were obtained by some as it moved along the skyline towards the cliffs where a second bird started a deeper and louder hoot. The wonderful sound filled the gorge and when it stopped that was our cue to make the journey back in the dark to Casa Rural El Recuerdo.

Day 5: Thursday 24th January

To the north-east of Trujillo lies the Belen Plains and it was here that we spent most of the morning. It was another warm, sunny day and the light was superb on the plains, with the snow-capped Gredos mountains just slightly hazy. The plains were full of flocks of small birds: **Spanish Sparrows, Goldfinches, Corn Bunting, Skylark** and **Linnet**. **Calandra Lark** song filled the sky, whilst **Crested** and **Thekla Lark** were seen along the road. We saw at a distance a flock of **Little Bustard** feeding in a field and whilst watching them, another group flew over and landed. The first group also took off and landed with the others. We repositioned ourselves and were able to see the birds clearly, counting a total of 270 individuals.

Some distant **Great Bustard** were also seen as we progressed across the plain, so we came across others until we reached a total of 57 individuals seen and all in excellent light. The last two birds in particular were closed of all and we were able to watch them preening, showing their wonderfully rich, patterned plumage.

Raptors also were around: several **Red Kites**, **Buzzard** and **Kestrel**, **Griffon** and **Black Vulture**. Then, along with a Red Kite, we discovered a curious-looking bird, giving us a hind view only, with a long, hooked bill, black head and broad neck and a patterned back. As it turned round, it became obvious that we were looking at a juvenile **Egyptian Vulture**, perhaps an overwintering bird. It was joined by two other **Red Kites** and we watched the **Egyptian Vulture** turning over dried cowpats to find beetles, presumably, beneath them. In the same field, we watched a male **Merlin** fly up at close quarters and then fly in a curious fluttering flight, imitating as it were the flight of a passerine (reminiscent of a lark or a Mistle Thrush). Nearby we enjoyed excellent views of a pair of **Great Spotted Cuckoo** courtship-feeding.

We then moved to the River Tozo, walking through dehesa woodland to a small reservoir. Close to the road was a fine **Great White Egret**, appearing to be mainly neck! It was the first of three we found there. There were double figures of **Little Egret**, **Woodlark** singing (our fifth lark species of the day) and at the reservoir itself there were **Black-winged Stilt**, **Gadwall**, **Shoveler** and **Mallard**. The warm sunshine brought out early butterflies: **Small Coppers** and **Small Heaths**.

We stopped briefly in Trujillo for final shopping before an al fresco lunch at casa Rural El Recuerdo, back to Trujillo for a quick visit to the square and then up the motorway to Madrid, arriving at 18.45, well in time for the check-in.

BIRDS RECORDED

Good results were obtained in this short winter break with an overall list of 122 birds species were recorded, as well as surprising selection of butterflies as well.

1. **Little Grebe**: Seen almost daily in small pools and reservoirs, with about ten at Arrocampo.
2. **Great Crested Grebe**: Small numbers at Sierra Brava reservoir and Monfragüe.
3. **Black-necked Grebe**: One at Sierra Brava on 21st January.
4. **Great Cormorant**: Seen daily.
5. **Cattle Egret**: Common and seen daily, especially on the ricefields where a large roost is present near Madrigalejo.
6. **Little Egret**: Seen almost daily, small numbers seen at Arrocampo and on the rice fields, whilst there were well over 20 on the Tozo reservoir.
7. **Great White Egret**: One seen at Arrocampo and three at the Tozo reservoir on 24th January.
8. **Grey Heron**: Seen everyday. About 15 at Arrocampo on 20th January.
9. **White Stork**: Common and seen everyday.
10. **Grey Lag Goose**: About 100 seen at Casas del Hito on 21st January, whilst over 400 in two skeins were seen high overhead the Tozo reservoir on 24th January, possibly starting northward migration.
11. **Gadwall**: Small numbers at Sierra Brava and Tozo reservoirs.

12. **Teal:** Small numbers at Arrocampo and on pool on Belén plains.
13. **Pintail:** A few on Sierra Brava reservoir.
14. **Mallard:** Seen most days.
15. **Shoveler:** Seen on most days.
16. **Black-winged Kite:** One at Casas del Hito on 21st January.
17. **Black Kite:** One near Sierra Brava reservoir on 21st January.
18. **Red Kite:** Seen daily, over 15 seen on 21st January.
19. **Egyptian Vulture:** Juvenile on Belén Plains on 24th January.
20. **Griffon Vulture:** Seen daily.
21. **Black Vulture:** Seen daily.
22. **Marsh Harrier:** About eight seen at Arrocampo and a similar number at the ricefields.
23. **Hen Harrier:** Three seen on the ricefields and two on the Belén plains on 24th January.
24. **Sparrowhawk:** A female at Vegas Altas on 21st January and one on Belén Plains on 24th January.
25. **Common Buzzard:** Seen daily.
26. **Spanish Imperial Eagle:** One adult seen briefly going to roost in Monfragüe on 23rd January.
27. **Bonelli's Eagle:** A pair in Monfragüe on 23rd January.
28. **Common Kestrel:** Seen almost daily.
29. **Merlin:** Two seen in the evening at Monfragüe on 23rd January and good views of a bird hunting on Belén plains on 24th January.
30. **Red-legged Partridge:** Seen almost daily.
31. **Water Rail:** Heard at Arrocampo and on the rice fields.
32. **Moorhen:** Seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and River Tozo.
33. **Purple Swamphen:** Excellent views at Arrocampo.
34. **Common Coot:** Several at Sierra Brava, Trujillo, Tozo and Arrocampo.
35. **Common Crane:** Several thousand at Casas del Hito and smaller numbers seen almost daily.
36. **Little Bustard:** A total of five seen on the rice fields on 21st January, 90 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January and 270 on Belén Plains on 24th January.
37. **Great Bustard:** 12 at Vegas Altas on 21st January, 5 at Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January and a total of 57 on Belén plains on 24th January.
38. **Black-winged Stilt:** Five at small reservoir near Trujillo on 23rd January and 2 on Tozo on 24th January.
39. **Avocet:** 4 at Casas del Hito on 21st January.
40. **Stone Curlew:** 15 in stubble near Madrigalejo on 21st January.
41. **Little Ringed Plover:** 12 near Palazuelo on 21st January.
42. **Golden Plover:** Over 200 seen on rice fields and near Sierra Brava on 21st January and a flock of 145 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January.
43. **Lapwing:** Seen daily in good numbers.
44. **Dunlin:** 8 near Palazuelo on 21st January.
45. **Common Snipe:** Single figures seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and on the small reservoir near Trujillo.
46. **Black-tailed Godwit:** About 30 seen on the rice fields on 21st January.
47. **Spotted Redshank:** One at Arrocampo on 20th January.

- 48. Greenshank:** Single figures seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and the Tozo reservoir.
- 49. Green Sandpiper:** Small number seen daily.
- 50. Common Sandpiper:** Two at Arrocampo and one at the Tozo.
- 51. Lesser Black-backed Gull:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields, as well as at Sierra Brava.
- 52. Black-headed Gull:** Fewer than above species.
- 53. Black-bellied Sandgrouse:** Five seen distantly on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January and heard on Belén Plain son 24th January.
- 54. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse:** About 50 on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January.
- 55. Rock Dove/Feral Dove:** Seen daily.
- 56. Wood Pigeon:** Seen almost daily.
- 57. Collared Dove:** Seen daily.
- 58. Great Spotted Cuckoo:** Two seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd January and a pair courtship feeding on Belén plains on 24th January.
- 59. Eagle Owl:** Two calling and one seen briefly in flight in Monfragüe on 23rd January.
- 60. Little Owl:** Seen at Casas del Hito, Vegas Altas and Belén Plains, as well as heard calling from Casa Rural El Recuerdo.
- 61. Long-eared Owl:** Two seen at Pago de San Clement on 22nd January and possibly one north of Monfragüe on 23rd January.
- 62. Kingfisher:** Seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and Monfragüe.
- 63. Hoopoe:** Seen daily.
- 64. Great Spotted Woodpecker:** Recorded near Palazuelo and two seen at Monfragüe.
- 65. Calandra Lark:** In small flocks and also birds in song on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca and on Belén Plains.
- 66. Crested Lark:** Seen daily.
- 67. Thekla Lark:** Recorded at Monfragüe and on Belén Plains.
- 68. Woodlark:** In song near Palazuelo, Santa Marta de Magasca, Monfragüe and Tozo.
- 69. Skylark:** Wintering flocks on plains and rice fields.
- 70. Crag Martin:** Seen at Monfragüe and near Santa Marta de Magasca.
- 71. House Martin:** 1 at Monfragüe 22nd January.
- 72. Meadow Pipit:** Seen daily.
- 73. Water Pipit:** One seen at Arrocampo on 20th January and one near Palazuelo on 21st January.
- 74. Grey Wagtail:** Seen almost daily.
- 75. White Wagtail:** Seen daily.
- 76. Wren:** One heard at Monfragüe.
- 77. Dunnock:** Recorded at Monfragüe and Pago de San Clemente.
- 78. Robin:** Seen almost daily.
- 79. Bluethroat:** Heard at Arrocampo and on the rice fields.
- 80. Black Redstart:** Seen almost daily.
- 81. Stonechat:** Seen almost daily.
- 82. Black Wheatear:** A pair at Rio Almonte south of Monroy on 23rd January.
- 83. Blue Rock Thrush:** Seen on Rio Almonte and Monfragüe.

- 84. **Blackbird**: Seen almost daily.
- 85. **Song Thrush**: Seen daily.
- 86. **Mistle Thrush**: Seen at Monfragüe.
- 87. **Cetti's Warbler**: Recorded (generally heard) on the ricefields, near Trujillo and Arrocampo.
- 88. **Zitting Cisticola**: Seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and Belén Plains.
- 89. **Sardinian Warbler**: Seen almost daily.
- 90. **Blackcap**: Seen almost daily.
- 91. **Chiffchaff**: Seen daily with particularly large numbers at Arrocampo.
- 92. **Firecrest**: One at Monfragüe on 22nd January.
- 93. **Long-tailed Tit**: Seen almost daily.
- 94. **Crested Tit**: Recorded in Monfragüe and Rio Almonte.
- 95. **Blue Tit**: Seen daily.
- 96. **Great Tit**: Seen almost daily.
- 97. **Nuthatch**: Heard in Monfragüe.
- 98. **Short-toed Treecreeper**: Two at Monfragüe.
- 99. **Penduline Tit**: Heard at Arrocampo.
- 100. **Southern Grey Shrike**: Seen daily.
- 101. **Jay**: Seen at Monfragüe.
- 102. **Azure-winged Magpie**: Seen daily, with flocks of over 40 in the rice fields and over 40 in Monfragüe.
- 103. **Magpie**: Seen daily, with over 100 coming to roost in Arrocampo.
- 104. **Jackdaw**: Seen almost daily.
- 105. **Raven**: Seen almost daily.
- 106. **Spotless Starling**: Seen daily.
- 107. **House Sparrow**: Seen daily.
- 108. **Spanish Sparrow**: Seen daily with large flocks of several hundreds on rice fields.
- 109. **Tree Sparrow**: Small numbers on rice fields.
- 110. **Rock Sparrow**: a flock of 6 near Santa Marta de Magasca.
- 111. **Red Avadavat**: Seen on the rice fields.
- 112. **Common Waxbill**: Small group at Rio Ruercas at Palazuelo
- 113. **Chaffinch**: Seen daily.
- 114. **Brambling**: Flock of about 40 at Rio Ruercas, Palazuelo on 21st January.
- 115. **Serin**: Seen daily.
- 116. **Greenfinch**: Present on the Belén plains.
- 117. **Goldfinch**: Seen daily.
- 118. **Siskin**: Seen at Palazuelo and Pago de San Clemente.
- 119. **Linnet**: Seen daily.
- 120. **Hawfinch**: Recorded almost daily.
- 121. **Reed Bunting**: Recorded at Arrocampo and on the rice fields.
- 122. **Corn Bunting**: Good numbers seen almost daily.

Other records:

Butterflies

- Bath White**: One or two at Sierra Brava 21st January.
- Clouded Yellow**: One at Casas del Hito 21st January.

Small Copper: One at Rio Almonte 23rd January, four or five Rio Tozo 24th January.

Wall: About three at Rio Almonte 23rd January

Small Heath: One at Rio Tozo 24th January.

Mammals

Roe Deer

Red Deer

Rabbit

Small bat (prob Pipistrelle)