

**Extremadura
14 – 21 March 2009**

Holiday participants

Leaders

Chris Durdin
Martin Kelsey

Extremadura

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Itinerary

Saturday 14th March: Arrival in Madrid and travel to Trujillo via A5 motorway, with a stop before Ventas de Retamosa for snacks. Arrived at Finca Santa Marta late afternoon.

Sunday 15th March: Morning walk on property of Finca Santa Marta and beyond. After lunch visit to Belén Plains. Dinner in La Troya, Trujillo.

Monday 16th March: From Trujillo to Torrejón El Rubío, then to Monfragüe National Park. Stop at Castle and then at car park opposite the crags of Peña Falcón. Lunch at Mirador de Tajadilla, then to the Portilla del Tietár.

Tuesday 17th March: South to Zorita with a visit to part of the Zorita Plains and then towards Madrigalejo. Stop at Sierra Brava reservoir and coffee stop just outside Madrigalejo and then exploring area of Casas del Hito, including visit to Charca del Hito (a large pool), where lunch taken. Then visit to Vegas Altas. Drive to rice fields near Palazuelo with a walk beside Rio Ruercas

Wednesday 18th March: Free morning in Trujillo, then east towards Villuercas mountains, with lunch on Almonte river near village of Cabañas del Castillo. Visit to village after lunch, with walk along base of cliffs.

Thursday 19th March: Exploring plains around Santa Marta de Magasca, coffee at the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, with lunch on Tamuja River south of the village.

Friday 20th March: Visit to heathland at Jaraicejo, then Arrocampo reservoir, between Almaraz and Saucedilla, afternoon walk on Cerro de Almaraz.

Saturday 21st March: Early morning departure to Madrid to check-in at airport shortly after 10.15 am for flight back to UK.

Daily Diary

14th March: Madrid to Finca Santa Marta

(Chris to complete)

15th March: Finca Santa Marta and Belén Plains

A warm and sunny day.....**(Chris to complete)**

Martin joined us at lunch, which was enjoyed in the gardens of the Finca. In the afternoon, we explored the open plains north-east of the small village of Belén close to Trujillo. At our first stop just outside the village, we enjoyed a superb

panorama of the habitat: the mosaic of colours reflecting the rotating land use with darker green fields of cereals, lighter green pastures and fields that had been fallow showing a greyish tinge formed by the multitude of dead thistle stems. From this vantage point we located our first Great Bustards, a rather distant small group and then two which were somewhat closer. Hoopoes perched obligingly on the stone wall beside the lane. Shortly afterwards we stopped again in a gateway, and looked back at the Great Bustards, six slowly and sedately striding across the gentle slope of the field. A nearby Crested Lark afforded excellent views. The laughing call of a Great Spotted Cuckoo attracted our attention and, albeit at a distance, we watched one being chased by a Magpie. Further along we stopped again and found small groups of Calandra Larks chasing each other low after the ground. Parties of Goldfinches flew up from the verges. Remarkably, Chris spotted a Sawfly Orchid on the verge as we drove, so a stop was made to photograph the solitary spike.

We enjoyed a short walk along a sunny track. Although few plants were yet in bloom, we found good numbers of two species of sand crocus. A pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos settled in a bush close to the road and then moved onto a fence line. Overhead a line of Griffon Vultures cruised over, with barely a flap of a wing. Back to Trujillo, we made a short stop at the bullring, where Lesser Kestrels were returning from their hunting forays over the plains.

Back at Finca Santa Marta, we went through the checklists before heading for Trujillo for dinner at the La Troya. Situated on the fine medieval town square, the restaurant provided an excellent series of local dishes. In the square it was the last evening of the annual Mediaeval Fair and the stalls thronged by the townsfolk set a colourful scene.

16th March: Monfragüe National Park

Another very warm day and as we congregated after breakfast a pair of Hawfinches flew over the car park and settled briefly on bare trees within view. We headed north from Trujillo to Monfragüe National Park. The route took us first through the rocky granite terrain around Trujillo, and then through dehesa as far as the eye could see, with the only changes being when we dropped down to cross three river valleys: the Tozo, the Almonte and finally the narrow Arroyo de la Vid. After the last crossing we followed the road winding up to the edge of the Monfragüe Park, heralded by a rocky ridge, capped by a small castle and a spectacular gorge through which passed the Tajo river. Our first stop was the castle itself which we reached by climbing up stone steps through groves of wild olive and cork oak. The view from the top was stunning: a vast dehesa panorama to the south, whilst to the north the hills of the park, the man-made lakes along the river valley and behind the snow-capped Gredos, perfectly clear. From the top of the escarpment we could look down on passing Griffon Vultures, as well as a pair of Red-billed Chough and Raven. A Southern Specked Wood found a sheltered wall to catch some sun. A distant flock of about 40 Great Cormorants was a surprise. Our next port of call was the famous Peña Falcón and Salto de Gitano (the Gypsy's leap). Here close to the base of the gorge, we enjoyed more spectacular views of Griffon Vulture, as

well as some Black Vultures, as well as a nesting pair of Black Storks. We also had excellent views of Blue Rock Thrush and Serin.

The road then took us over a bridge, crossing the River Tajo and we stopped briefly to admire the huge flock of nesting House Martins, some rather distant Alpine Swifts and, best of all, a pair of Short-toed Eagles.

After a stop at Villareal de San Carlos to pick up leaflets about the park, we continued through to Tajadilla, a lovely picnic spot just downstream from one of the dams along the course of the river. It overlooked another rock face with nesting Griffon Vultures. Black Kites and a magnificent pair of Egyptian Vulture were present as well. Black Storks made several appearances, including four in the sky at the same time on one occasion. A pair of Bonelli's Eagles also were seen, soaring overhead briefly before heading south over the cliff. A Nettle Tree Butterfly was seen quite well and a young Red Deer appeared coming down to the riverside.

At the Portilla, the viewpoint directed our gaze onto the wonderful strata of the cliffs opposite, supporting another colony of Griffon Vulture. A pair of Black Stork stood on the highest part of the rock face, whilst a pair of Great Cormorant swam in the river. It was rather quiet at first, although a Common Cuckoo was heard, but we enjoyed the wonderful serenity of the place. Then, just a minute after a Short-toed Eagle had passed overhead, spotted coming over the brow of the hill opposite, was a fine adult Spanish Imperial Eagle which obligingly made a series of wide slow soaring circles, allowing the sunshine to catch the brilliant white leading edge of the wing.

Pottering along the road, we found Angel Tears and Hoop Petticoat Narcissus growing side-by-side on the bank beside the road, along with Spanish Bluebells and Spanish Milk Vetch. As we returned to the vehicle, Martin managed to find the sitting Eagle Owl on her nest, which had concealed itself well up until that point. All of us saw at least some movement of the cryptically plumaged bird, and a lucky few also saw her wink!

We returned to Finca Santa Marta for tea and checklist.

17th March: Madrigalejo

Although clear and sunny like yesterday, the easterly wind had picked up considerably and it remained breezy all day. We headed south, through the town of Zorita and then across the plains to the reservoir of Sierra Brava where we made a brief stop. The water was very choppy and apart from a Great Crested Grebe and some Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls little was seen.

Descending to the floodplains which are a major rice-producing area, we drove entered the area known as Casas del Hito. Good views of Southern Grey Shrike were obtained and a large colony of tree-nesting White Stork. We stooped to look at a Greenshank and a rather fine breeding-plumaged Water Pipit when an Egyptian Mongoose crossed the road in front of us. Passing through rather bare ploughed land, we stopped to look at some showy Spanish Sparrows before we

reached an embanked pool. Walking along the bank, we struggled in the wind to keep tripods steady as we scanned the water. There were groups of Mallard and Shoveler and also, rather surprisingly, a flock of six Avocet swimming in the middle of the pool. On wet ground to the north of the pool we found a large scattered party of Little Ringed Plover, accompanied by a Kentish Plover.

After a coffee-stop, we visited another area of mixed rice and wheat cultivations near the village of Vegas Altas. The wet fields there also had good numbers of Water Pipits – clearly a significant passage was underway. Patches of Barbary Nut Iris were also out in flower. Other species seen included Little Egret and Green Sandpiper.

We completed the day with a very pleasant walk along the Via Verde (long-distance path) near the village of Fernando V. Some shelter was available on stretches and a few butterflies (Clouded Yellow, Western Dappled White and Southern Speckled Wood were on the wing). Cetti's Warblers sung from the riverine vegetation and the plant list was augmented with a Star of Bethlehem, a Yellow Toadflax and more flowering Barbary Nut Iris.

18th March: Trujillo and Cabañas del Castillo

Another warm and sunny day, with much calmer than yesterday. The group spent the morning at leisure in Trujillo, with the beautiful medieval town square as the starting point, from which the narrow cobbled streets led up to the castle and old part of the town. This is dominated by the old granite-built palaces and large churches, testimony to the wealth brought back from South America by the conquistadores born in Trujillo. The same buildings with their old tiled roofs, support one of Spain's most important colonies of Lesser Kestrel as well as pairs of Pallid Swift.

At 12.30, we left Trujillo and headed to the Villuercas mountains, a lovely series of ridges to the east of the dehesa and plains that we had been exploring over the last few days. We stopped for lunch at a crossing of the Rio Almonte, where the river passes through a narrow gorge. As well as Griffon Vultures, we saw a Short-toed Eagle, Grey Wagtails and a Rock Bunting. Nearby is the tiny village of Cabañas del Castillo, perched at the base of one of a pair of crags, on the top of which sits an ancient castle. We walked through the village, then along a path leading to the old church and a gap between the crags, to afford one a magnificent view of the valley to the east. A Black Wheatear was quickly found near the church, whilst a Peregrine on a lofty perch was also seen. The rocks above the village also held Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes. From the vantage point overlooking the valley behind the village, we could watch passing Griffon Vultures. Juniper and Dwarf Sheep's Bit were found growing and on our return to the minibus, another Black Wheatear was found and we were rewarded with a lovely view of a Short-toed Eagle set against a cloudless, deep blue sky. We returned to the Finca on a cross-country road through the dehesa, the highlight of the journey being a Black Stork.

19th March: Santa Marta de Magasca

Today we drove west of Trujillo, and took the minor road towards Santa Marta de Magasca. Stopping at the edge of the plains we walked a track through a belt of Retama, having several sightings of Great Spotted Cuckoo as well as a pair of Black-winged Stilts which appeared from a dew pond. The lark song around us included Calandra, Crested and Woodlark. We had sightings of several Great Bustard in flight and a fine male Hen Harrier also passed by. Careful scanning by Peter revealed one of the highlights of the walk, a group of about twelve Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, which provide good views in excellent light. From the same spot, we also saw initially a male and female Little Bustard and then a flock of at least thirty. Returning to the minibus, a further dozen or so Little Bustard were seen.

Continuing along the road, we found a Northern Wheatear, Woodchat Shrike and stopped to watch a Black Vulture standing in a field, close to sheep, to which it seemed comparable in size!

After a very pleasant stop for refreshments at Santa Marta de Magasca, we headed south to the Rio Tamuja, set in a deep wooded valley. Here we had lunch in this wonderful spot. Within minutes of arriving we enjoyed the sight of a Bonelli's Eagle and Short-toed Eagle close together. Later, the Bonelli's Eagle reappeared with its mate for an encore. The valley was full of Crag Martins, with a few Red-rumped Swallows. Iberian Water Frogs croaked occasionally and several clumps of Common Jonquil were also seen. We then drove towards the Cáceres road. Taking a small country lane for a few hundred metres, we stopped near a pool which had an interesting set of species: Lapwing, Little Ringed Plover, Cormorant, Mallard and Teal. Iberian Terrapins were also present in number, sunning themselves on the bank. Proceeding along the road we stopped then we found a male Montagu's Harrier on a fence post. Soon after taking off, it was joined by another and then a female and we delighted in the spectacle of their display. Their small size only became apparent when a Black Kite came too close and was mobbed briefly by them. Green Striped White butterflies passed across the fields and as we retraced our steps we found a fine Black-eared Wheatear, of the "black throated" form.

At the top of the road, we stopped to watch a flock of about 70 Great Bustard in a field right next to the road: a quite unforgettable view. A pair of Short-toed Eagle was also in courtship and as we returned to the road for Trujillo, another Black-eared Wheatear was seen.

We returned to Finca Santa Marta for tea and checklist and before dinner, Marcelino Cardalliaguet (Extremadura representative of the Spanish Ornithological Society) gave an illustrated talk on bird conservation in Extremadura and received a cheque from Chris, as a contribution from the group to continue SEO's work. Our guests at dinner were Steve and Karen Fletcher, bird photographers based locally.

20th March: Jaraicejo and Arrocampo

Remarkably, yet another sunny, cloudless day giving us an unbroken spell of sunshine throughout the whole holiday. It was also the warmest day of the week and we spent the first couple of hours visiting the extensive lavender and

retama-dominated heath land north of the small town of Jaraicejo. As we entered the heath, a Black-winged Kite flew in front of us and briefly paused to perch on a bare tree nearby. Once on the heath we were soon enjoying good views of Thekla Lark and a series of sightings of Dartford Warbler, including their jerky song-flight. Wandering down to a picturesque cork oak grove, a very brief snatch of Western Orphean Warbler was heard, but sadly it did not call again. The grove was full of the sound of Short-toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch, with calls of Crested Tit also picked-up. Butterflies, including Spanish Festoon and Small Copper appeared as we returned to the van, but the highlight was an adult Golden Eagle soaring above us with vultures.

Onto to the reservoir of Arrocampo, where we visited first an agricultural zone to the north where we quickly found a Black-winged Kite perched on a tree. Flocks of Spanish Sparrow haunted shrubs close-by. After lunch in the shade of trees, we visited three parts of the Arrocampo site, where a wide belt of fringing vegetation provide suitable habitat for a variety of waterbirds. At the first stop, we had excellent views of a Great White Egret and a Little Egret, whilst a Water Pipit and a Bluethroat were seen by a few of us. The next stop offered us excellent views of Purple Swamphen and a wonderful Squacco Heron. Purple Heron were also present, and Savi's Warblers sang in the distance. Finally, at a third site we made a short walk and were lucky enough to find an old Penduline's Tit nest which was being visited by a male who appeared to be raiding it for a new nest.

We completed the afternoon with a very pleasant foray onto part of the limestone hill nearby (Cerro de Almaraz) where we found five species of Orchid (Naked man, Conical, Mirror, Sawfly and Woodcock). We could happily have spent more time exploring there, but the afternoon warmth on our backs also encouraged thoughts of cold drinks and ice cream, so we repaired to a nearby bar before returning to the Finca where we had our final afternoon tea and checklist call-over.

21st March: Finca Santa Marta to Madrid

As we set off at 06.50 for the airport, with the wind freshening, in contrast to the calm weather of the last few days. Swallows started the dawn chorus. We had an easy run to the airport, arriving in good time for the check-in and farewells.

Systematic list – Birds

A summary of sightings contributed by the whole group at the daily “call-over”

Little Grebe Sightings of singles of two days on small pools.

Great Crested Grebe One bird seen in very choppy water on Sierra Brava reservoir on 17th March and several at Arrocampo on 20th.

Cormorant Seen almost daily along rivers and on water bodies as well as a flock of 40 over Monfragüe on 16th March.

Squacco Heron	One seen at close quarters at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Cattle Egret	Small flocks seen on the ricefields and at Arrocampo.
Little Egret	Small numbers seen near Trujillo on 15 th March, on River Almonte on 18 th March and at Arrocampo on 20 th .
Great White Egret	Two or three at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Grey Heron	Seen almost every day.
Purple Heron	Two seen at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Black Stork	About ten seen at Monfragüe on 16 th March and one near Madroñera on 18 th March.
White Stork	Common throughout the week, around towns and villages, as well as in the fields.
Gadwall	Two pairs at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Teal	A pair on a pool near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19 th March.
Mallard	Seen almost daily.
Shoveler	About ten on a pool at Casas del Hito on 17 th March.
Black-shouldered Kite	One seen along motorway on 14 th March, one at heath land at Jaraicejo and one at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Black Kite	Double figures seen everyday.
Red Kite	Single figures seen everyday, especially over dehesa and the plains.
Egyptian Vulture	About six seen at Monfragüe on 16 th March.
Griffon Vulture	Good numbers seen everyday, especially at Monfragüe on 16 th March (over 100 seen).
Black Vulture	Seen daily, and double figures at Monfragüe.
Short-toed Eagle	Seen almost daily, often in pairs.
Marsh Harrier	About five on the rice fields on 17 th March with singles near Trujillo, on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca and at Arrocampo.

- Hen Harrier** A male on Belén Plains on 15th March, a female on the ricefields on 17th March and a male on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.
- Montagu's Harrier** Two males and a female on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.
- Sparrowhawk** One on 15th March near the Finca was the only sighting.
- Common Buzzard** Seen almost daily.
- Spanish Imperial Eagle** One bird soaring at Portilla del Tiétar in Monfragüe on 16th March.
- Golden Eagle** An adult soaring over the heath at Jaraicejo on 20th March.
- Bonelli's Eagle** A pair at the Tajadilla in Monfragüe on 16th March and a pair over Rio Tamuja near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.
- Lesser Kestrel** Seen daily in double figures. Excellent views obtained in Trujillo of this exquisite little falcon.
- Common Kestrel** Seen almost daily in single figures.
- Peregrine** Two at Cabañas del Castillo on 18th March.
- Red-legged Partridge** Seen most days.
- Water Rail** Heard on Rio Ruercas on 17th March.
- Moorhen** Small numbers on rice fields and Arrocampo.
- Purple Swamphen** Excellent views of at least five birds at Arrocampo on 20th March.
- Coot** Present at the reservoir of Arrocampo.
- Little Bustard** 40 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.
- Great Bustard** 10 on Belén Plains on 15th March, but these were outshone by about 100 on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca, including a flock of about 70 close to the road on 19th March.
- Avocet** A party of six at Casas del Hito on 17th March.
- Black-winged Stilt** Two seen flying from a small pool on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.

- Little Ringed Plover** Seen almost daily, largest number was about 15 on wet fields at Casas del Hito on 17th March.
- Kentish Plover** One at Casas del Hito on 17th March
- Lapwing** Very few of this winter visitor still present: 5 west of Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March were the only records.
- Snipe** Two at Casas del Hito on 17th March and one at Arrocampo on 20th March.
- Greenshank** One at Casas del Hito on 17th March and one at Arrocampo on 20th March.
- Green Sandpiper** About ten on rice fields on 17th March and singles on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March and at Arrocampo on 20th March.
- Common Sandpiper** Two at Casas del Hito on 17th March and one at Arrocampo on 20th March.
- Black-headed Gull** Small groups seen near Santa Marta de Magasca, Arrocampom Sierra Brava and on the rice fields.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull** One at Sierra Brava reservoir on 17th March.
- Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** About 15 seen well on the ground on plains east of Santa Marta de Magasca on 19th March.
- Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon** Seen daily
- Woodpigeon** Small numbers seen almost daily.
- Collared Dove** Seen daily.
- Great Spotted Cuckoo** Seen almost daily, generally in pairs.
- Common Cuckoo** Heard at Monfragüe, Santa Marta de Magasca and near Jaraicejo.
- Scops Owl** Heard most evenings at the Finca.
- Eagle Owl** Female at the nest at Monfragüe on 16th March.
- Pallid Swift** Excellent views at Trujillo on 18th March.
- Alpine Swift** Seen distantly at Monfragüe.
- Kingfisher** One at Rio Ruercas on 17th March.

Hoopoe	Commonly seen everyday.
Green Woodpecker	Heard at the Finca on 20 th March.
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Heard drumming at Monfragüe.
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Heard drumming at Jaraicejo.
Calandra Lark	Seen on visits to open plains at Belén, near Santa Marta de Magasca and at Jaraicejo.
Crested Lark	Common and seen daily.
Thekla Lark	Excellent views of several at Jaraicejo on 20 th March.
Woodlark	Heard and sometimes seen almost daily at the Finca.
Sand Martin	Seen at Casas del Hito on 17 th March and common at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Crag Martin	Common near bridges and in rocky areas in Monfragüe, in the Villuercas mountains and near Santa Marta de Magasca, also present in Trujillo.
Swallow	Common every day.
Red-rumped Swallow	Seen almost daily.
House Martin	Seen almost every day.
Meadow Pipit	Small numbers seen almost daily.
Water Pipit	Large numbers (30+) on the rice fields, many in breeding plumage on 17 th March and one at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Grey Wagtail	Four or five present on Rio Almonte on 18 th March.
White Wagtail	Seen every day.
Wren	Recorded daily.
Robin	Small numbers seen almost daily.
Bluethroat	One at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Black Redstart	Present around the Finca and also seen at Monfragüe and Cabañas del Castillo.

Stonechat	Common and seen every day.
Northern Wheatear	One east of Santa Marta de Magasca on 19 th March.
Black-eared Wheatear	Two west of Santa Marta de Magasca on 19 th March.
Black Wheatear	Two birds at Cabañas del Castillo on 18 th March.
Blue Rock Thrush	Seen in Monfragüe on 16 th March and Cabañas del Castillo on 18 th March.
Blackbird	Seen daily.
Song Thrush	Seen daily.
Mistle Thrush	Singles seen at Monfragüe and in the Villuercas.
Cetti's Warbler	Heard on 17 th March and at Arrocampo (one seen) on 20 th March.
Zitting Cisticola	Heard and seen almost daily.
Savi's Warbler	Three or four singing at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Dartford Warbler	Two or three singing near Jaraicejo on 20 th March.
Sardinian Warbler	Seen almost daily.
Western Orphean Warbler	One brief burst of song at Jaraicejo on 20 th March
Blackcap	Seen daily and in good numbers around Finca.
Chiffchaff	Seen on one day near the Finca and small numbers at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Firecrest	One near Monfragüe castle on 11 th March and one at Valdecañas on 14 th March.
Long-tailed Tit	Small numbers seen most days.
Blue Tit	Seen daily.
Great Tit	Seen daily.
Penduline Tit	A male singing and seen collecting next material from an old nest at Arrocampo on 20 th March.
Short-toed Treecreeper	Seen and heard almost daily, especially around the Finca.

Southern Grey Shrike	Seen almost daily.
Woodchat Shrike	Two birds south of Monfragüe on 16 th March and one near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19 th March.
Jay	Seen once near the Finca and also at Monfragüe.
Azure-winged Magpie	Common and seen everyday.
Magpie	Common and seen every day.
Red-billed Chough	Two at Monfragüe castle on 16 th March.
Jackdaw	Common and seen almost everyday.
Raven	Seen almost daily.
Spotless Starling	Common every day.
House Sparrow	Common every day.
Spanish Sparrow	Flocks on the rice fields and at Arrocampo.
Tree Sparrow	Two or three at Casas del Hito on 17 th March.
Red Avadavat	Small flocks on the rice fields on 17 th March.
Chaffinch	Small numbers seen every day.
Serin	Seen every day, often in song-flight.
Greenfinch	Seen daily near the Finca.
Goldfinch	Small flocks seen daily: over 30 on Belén Plains.
Siskin	Two near Rio Ruercas on 17 th March.
Linnet	Seen almost daily.
Hawfinch	Recorded on two mornings at the Finca, as well as at Monfragüe on 16 th March.
Rock Bunting	Seen briefly at Monfragüe on 16 th March, in the Villuercas on 18 th March and by the Rio Tamuja on 19 th March.
Corn Bunting	Seen almost daily. One of the commonest birds of the plains.

Wildlife sightings of the week, as nominated by group members

MAMMALS

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

BUTTERFLIES

OTHER INVERTEBRATES

PLANTS

(Selected species)