

Birding Extremadura and Casa Rural El Recuerdo

WINTER TOUR 28th December 2009 – 3rd January 2010

Guests: Peter and Vana Chadwick

Guide: Martin Kelsey

Itinerary

28th December 2009: Collection mid-afternoon at Madrid Airport and transfer to Casa Rural El Recuerdo, Pago de San Clemente, Trujillo.

29th December 2009: Belén Plains, Plains near Santa Marta de Magasca, River Tamuja.

30th December 2009: Sierra Brava Reservoir (south of Zorita) and the rice-growing area near Madrigalejo (Moheda Alta, Vegas Altas and Casas del Hito)

31st December 2009: Plains near Santa Marta de Magasca, Rivers Magasca and Almonte, Talaván Reservoir.

1st January 2010: Monfragüe National Park.

2nd January 2010: Arrocampo reservoir and Villuercas Mountains (River Almonte and Cabañas del Castillo).

3rd January 2010: Early morning transfer to Madrid airport.

TRIP REPORT

28th December 2009

Peter and Vana arrived to a misty and wet Madrid mid-afternoon and we were soon in late afternoon traffic heading out of the city. Once on the A5 motorway for Extremadura, the traffic eased considerably, but we had to contend with quite heavy rain and patches of mist. The weather prevented much of the landscape we passed being visible, but the journey passed quickly as we enjoyed tales of life in Fiji and other adventures.

29th December 2009

A rather gloomy, misty and wet morning and most of the day we experienced heavy showers and leaden skies. It was, nevertheless, remarkably mild. The focus today was the birds of the open plains (or *pseudo-steppes* to give the landscape its correct ecological term i.e. like the steppes of Eastern Europe or

Central Asia but originally woodland, cleared by man). The reasoning was in demanding weather conditions, it is better to be looking for birds used to living in exposed conditions....we would not have achieved much searching for small woodland birds for example!

That being said, one of the first birds we saw was a female Dartford Warbler which flew from roadside brambles to perch, albeit precariously, on the fence, its long tail perhaps not helping very much to balance the little bird against the wind and driving rain! More at ease were a flock of Little Bustards, found close to the start of the Belén Plains. They flew up as we arrived, about 140 birds in quite a flight flock, shimmering white with the distinctive siffling sound made as the wings flapped being easily audible. However, they were not going far and they quickly dropped again to the ground where we watched them feeding amongst another 40 or so. Further along we saw several Southern Grey Shrikes, as well as Hoopoe, Calandra, Thekla and Crested Lark, Skylark, Golden Plover and Lapwing. A wonderful Red Kite passed close by and a couple of Buzzards were also seen.

We left the Belén Plains in another shower and headed west of Trujillo to visit the plains near the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. At a first stop to scan, we found more Little Bustard. Nearby, further views were obtained of Calandra Lark, Southern Grey Shrike as well as other wintering species like Meadow Pipit. South of the village, we stopped for lunch beside the Rio Tamuja, which was in full spate. Quite sheltered from the weather, we enjoyed a very productive hour or so. Pride of place were the pair of Bonelli's Eagle which appeared far away down the valley and slowly drifted towards us, the female noticeably larger than the male. They subsequently settled on a pylon to preen. However, small birds were also evident: two Hawfinches, Kingfishers, Grey and White Wagtail, Crag Martin and several Chiffchaffs searching for tiny insects. We also had several brief views of an Otter, happily managing the fast current with ease.

South of the river we entered more open country and near a small pool with four Teal, we came across a stately group of five Great Bustard, striding along the skyline, making the occasional peck to the ground, all facing the wind. With more inclement weather arriving, we returned to the Belén Plains, where the Little Bustards were in the same place as earlier. Since the morning however, a lot more rain had fallen, the waterlogged ground covered with streams and flowing water, draining into lower ground which were quickly becoming flooded. A pair of Greenshank looked perfectly at home on this boggy ground, beside Lapwing and Meadow Pipits, whilst a grey-looking fox loped across the ground behind. As light fell, we returned to Casa Rural El Recuerdo to find a welcoming fire in the hearth.

30th December 2009

The day dawned with broken cloud with the prospect of some sunshine. Vana found a Hawfinch in the garden as we prepared to set off. Today we headed south-east, through the town of Zorita and then south towards Madrigalejo, crossing the expanse of the Zorita steppes. Our first stop was a view across

part of the Sierra Brava reservoir. A fine Red Kite coasted over the bank, whilst a set of dabbling ducks could be seen, albeit at some distance, in considerable numbers. We then descended to the rice growing plains. The heavy rain of the recent days had left sheets of surface water over the fields and the rivers were breaking their banks. Parties of Common Crane were seemingly everywhere: in the rice and maize stubble fields, in the patches of *dehesa* and flying overhead. There were also good numbers of White Stork, some already standing on nests on the church tower of Madrigalejo. Our first stop was the tower hide at Moheda Alta giving us an excellent view over rice stubble fields, where several thousand Common Crane and Grey Lag Geese were feeding. Three Ruddy Shelduck flew in, circling for some time before then descending and practically disappearing into the stubble. We carefully checked through the throng of Grey Lags, but no other goose species was present, save a curious bird with the head pattern of a Canada Goose but with a pink bill – perhaps a Canada-Grey Lag hybrid? At one point, all the geese stopped feeding and became alert: a fox was making its way across the stubble, passing within almost pecking distance from a family of cranes.

The skies were getting darker with threatening clouds and the wind became stronger. We returned to the vehicle and drove to a nearby embankment, arriving there as the rain started pelting down. During a brief respite we climbed the bank to check the site, but it yielded only Little and Great Crested Grebe and a few duck (Teal, Gadwall and Mallard).

We then drove to the village of Vegas Altas, following farm tracks across the arable land and paddies. Again cranes in amazing numbers. We also saw huge flocks of Spanish Sparrow, Hen Harrier, Buzzard and a fine Peregrine. A single Water Pipit was also found.

We completed the day in the Casas del Hito area. The grazing land as we entered was largely flooded, with the sheep looking very miserable. There we also had good close views of Golden Plover, a species which has been common over the last couple of days. Parties of Red Avadavat flew from the rank vegetation in the ditches. We found a Black-winged Kite perched on the top of a tree. We stopped to walk beside the embanked pool. Several hundred Grey Lag Geese were resting along with duck such as Shelduck, Pintail, Shoveler, Pochard, Teal, Gadwall and Mallard. A Quail came up at Peter's foot and at the back of the pool up to 30 Marsh harrier started to form a pre-roost gathering. Hundreds of Common Crane started to get airborne as well. As the sky darkened again for another downpour, we searched a ditch for an elusive Bluethroat, obtaining the briefest of views in flight.

31st December 2009

It was a largely overcast day with frequent heavy showers and high winds. Under these conditions, it seemed best again to spend time on the steppe species. After a few minutes birding in the garden, we drove to the plains east of Santa Marta de Magasca. At the first stop we found a small group of Little Bustards in one field and a group of Great Bustard in the neighbouring field, and as the light improved we detected, amongst feeding Golden Plover, Lapwing

and larks, a party of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Following the road, we were able to get a bit closer to them and obtained good views. Stopping further along the road, the group flew and were soon joined by others until there were about 70 or so sandgrouse in the air together.

From Santa Marta de Magasca we headed north, crossing the Rio Magasca, where Crag Martins circled above and then stopping at the Rio Almonte for lunch. It was in full spate and the strong wind with droplets of rain enhanced the stormy feel. Beside the river we found Black Redstart, Grey Wagtail and a Rock Bunting.

We then visited the Talaván reservoir. Parties of Common Crane were flying to the east, whilst in the reed mace in front of a small hide, we located by call a Penduline Tit and then remarkably, despite the strong winds, found first one and then another feeding on the flowering heads of the reed mace – it looked that they must have been clinging on to the flower spikes as if for dear life. We had wonderful views of these enchanting little birds. The water level of the reservoir was very high, there was no exposed mud, and it held just some Mallard, Coot, Little and Great Crested Grebes. We did however see an otter in the middle of the reservoir.

We completed the day making a further sortie onto the plains to look for sandgrouse, but apart from a small party of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in flight, we were unlucky. It was superb however to see the large numbers of Golden Plover, as well Calandra Larks.

Back at Casa Rural El Recuerdo in the evening, we enjoyed a special New Year's Eve dinner, completed just in time to see the New Year in with the traditional twelve grapes (one eaten on each strike of the clock at midnight), followed by a glass of Spanish Cava.

1st January 2010

After last night's festivities, we had a slightly later start than usual, setting off for Monfragüe National Park under a threatening sky at about 9.30. We drove north from Trujillo through almost fifty kilometres through the seemingly endless dehesa landscape, broken just by the river valleys of the Tozo, Almonte and El Vid, all running east to west. Our first stop in Monfragüe was the Peña Falcon, a cliff which rises spectacularly from the River Tajo and is home to one of the largest Griffon Vulture colonies in the park. As we arrived, the first vultures were getting airborne, whilst the majority was still perched on the cliff face: as one scanned the rocks more and more could be seen. Despite the damp, windy weather, some vultures had already been active, as they were returning to the colony bearing whole tussocks of grass and branches for the nests. Sometimes the Griffon Vultures were joined by a Black Vulture, a larger bird, with parallel-sided wings. While we watched, the barking call of the Spanish Imperial Eagle was heard and a few minutes later the eagle passed overhead, its distinctive narrow-winged, long-tailed shape making it easy to pick out amongst the circling vultures. The clouds were breaking and the sky was filling with vultures, many drifting off to the west. A pair of Ravens was catching the updrafts gusting close

to the cliff-face, being held stationary in mid-air and a fine Red Deer stag stood as a silhouette on the hill top.

We drove through the park to the viewpoint on the Portilla del Tiétar, where rocky outcrops with wonderfully convoluted strata stood beside the Tiétar river. The wind had strengthened, ruffling the surface of the river, giving it the appearance of the sea, making the Cormorants there appear quite at home.

The Griffon Vultures were arriving with nest material and as we watched them, a fine adult Spanish Imperial Eagle entered the scene. It circled, disappeared behind the cliff and reappeared to land on the highest point. The white leading edge to the forewing showed superbly, as did its powerful bill. A Griffon Vulture came in and displaced the eagle, which then flew overhead and away. It was not long before it reappeared, by which time the clouds were breaking and as it circled the white on the forewing shone brightly in the sunshine, in contrast to the dark wing. It returned to the same perch as before.

Following lunch we made our way back along the road, making stops at various viewpoints. The wind was dropping and the afternoon sunshine brought more birds to the air. Tight flocks of Wood Pigeon, some numbering several hundreds, were passing through. We walked beside the river Tajo, at the base of the Mediterranean woodland-covered slopes. Whilst watching a small party of Griffon Vultures with a single Black Vulture, a female Sparrowhawk appeared and, in typical fashion, darted through the bushes. Seconds later a fine Bonelli's Eagle came in over the hillside and it was joined by the Sparrowhawk, which made several dives at the eagle to mob it.

The sun was getting lower and we returned to the Portilla del Tiétar as dusk fell. Little Egrets flew past to roost and even as it was getting dark, vultures were still arriving on the cliffs, with the inevitable noisy commotion as birds tried to join others on the ledges. The clouds to the north had lifted and we could make out the snow-covered slopes of the Gredos mountains. We waited in hope of an appearance of an Eagle Owl, but although the night was calm and cloudless, only a single call was heard from the wooded hillside. The stars were coming out as we returned to the car, and we found Jupiter with three of its moons shining brightly.

2nd January 2010

The day dawned foggy, but fortunately as we approached our destination, the reservoir of Arrocampo, the weather had improved greatly and the wind had dropped. The reservoir provides cooling water for the nearby power station and in winter the water temperature is a few degrees higher than it would otherwise be. This, plus the fact that the water level hardly fluctuates, means that there is a good belt of fringing vegetation, making it an excellent area for marshland birds. We quickly found two Purple Swamphen, perched high in the reeds. Hundreds of Lapwing were stood in adjacent fields, whilst a Marsh Harrier drifted at the back of the pool. We drove to another hide, seeing a male Hen Harrier and female Marsh Harrier flying up from the ground together. From the hide we had excellent views of two other Purple Swamphen, a party of Curlew

flew over, two Cetti's Warblers chased each other in the foreground, whilst pride of place must go to a splendid male Bluethroat which flew into a nearby bay and then perched in the reed tops for us to see. In the distance, amongst the Crag Martins feeding over the water were a House Martin and one or two Swallows, probably overwintering birds.

We then explored an area of *dehesa*, finding four Green Sandpipers on a small pool as well as another Swallow.

We then left Arrocampo and headed to the Villuercas mountains via Deleitosa. We stopped beside the River Almonte, between the village of Retamosa and Cabañas del Castillo for lunch. It was a lovely spot and the weather was kind to us. A large flock of perhaps 70 Siskins flew up from a clump of alders and whilst Griffon Vultures soared over head, at one time along with a female Sparrowhawk.

We headed to Cabañas del Castillo, stopping to check out a party of small birds which flew up from the road: they were an attractive group of Woodlark. At the village, we had barely started walking from the car when we found a fine Black Weatear which afforded us excellent views, at one point from very close quarters. Nearby was a male Black Redstart, a female Blue Rock Thrush as well as a party of Serin. We enjoyed a wonderful walk up through the village to the base of the rocky crags above the settlement, taking in the magnificent views. At the top of the path, a small flock of birds moved through the scattered cork oak trees: Nuthatch, Great Tit, Blue Tit, the ubiquitous Chiffchaff, a pair of Sardinian Warblers and two very smart Firecrests.

We completed the afternoon with a stroll along the quiet hillside road surrounded by cork oaks. Red-billed Choughs and a Peregrine were seen on the crags above, whilst in the woodland we found Great-spotted Woodpecker, Firecrest, Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper. As the light fell, we made our way back to Trujillo and home.

3rd January 2010

We left Casa Rural El Recuerdo at 06.15 and after just one stop en route, arrived at terminal one of the airport in Madrid at 09.15, well in time for the check-in.

List of species seen

Despite the unusually bad weather conditions prevailing during most of the tour (long periods of heavy rain and high winds) which was a significant constraint in the plans, we recorded a total of **115 species of birds**. These are listed below.

1. **Little Grebe:** Present on the pool at Moheda Alta on 30th December and on Talaván reservoir on 31st December.

2. **Great Crested Grebe:** Seen at Sierra Brava reservoir on 30th December and Talaván reservoir on 31st December.
3. **Great Cormorant:** Seen most days, with largest number seen in Monfragüe National Park.
4. **Cattle Egret:** Seen most days.
5. **Little Egret:** Seen most days.
6. **Grey Heron:** Seen most days.
7. **White Stork:** Seen almost everyday, with large numbers present on the rice fields and birds already on nests in towns such as Deleitosa.
8. **Grey Lag Goose:** 12 birds on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December, several thousand on rice fields on 30th December and about 40 seen at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
- **Canada/Grey Lag Goose hybrid:** One at Moheda Alta on 30th December.
9. **Egyptian Goose:** One at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
10. **Ruddy Shelduck:** Three at Moheda Alta on 30th December.
11. **Common Shelduck:** Two on pool at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
12. **Wigeon:** Seen amongst rafts of duck on Sierra Brava reservoir on 30th December.
13. **Gadwall:** Seen on Sierra Brava reservoir, Moheda Alta and at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
14. **Teal:** Four birds on pool near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December and also present on Sierra Brava, Moheda Alta and Casas del Hito on 30th December.
15. **Pintail:** Present amongst ducks on pool at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
16. **Mallard:** seen almost everyday.
17. **Shoveler:** Present at Casas del Hito on 30th December and Arrocampo on 2nd January.
18. **Pochard:** At last on drake on pool at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
19. **Black-winged Kite:** One at Casas del Hito on 30th December.

20. **Red Kite:** Seen everyday, usually singly, but more sightings on plains on Belén and Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December.
21. **Griffon Vulture:** Hundreds seen in Monfragüe National Park on 1st January, but also present near Santa Marta de Magasca on 31st December and the Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
22. **Black Vulture:** Several sightings in Monfragüe National Park on 1st January and also a bird seen in the Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
23. **Marsh Harrier:** Present on the rice fields on 30th December (with about 30 in air together at Casas del Hito) and also at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
24. **Hen Harrier:** At least four seen on rice fields on 30th December, a male near Talaván on 31st December and a male at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
25. **Sparrowhawk:** Two females seen at Monfragüe on 1st January and one in the Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
26. **Common Buzzard:** Mainly seen on the plains and the rice fields.
27. **Spanish Imperial Eagle:** Two seen in Monfragüe National Park on 1st January.
28. **Bonelli's Eagle:** A pair seen south of Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December and at least one seen in Monfragüe National Park on 1st January.
29. **Common Kestrel:** Seen almost every day.
30. **Merlin:** Very brief views (by Martin only) near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th and 31st December.
31. **Peregrine:** Excellent views of one on ground near Vegas Altas on 30th December and one in the Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
32. **Red-legged Partridge:** seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th and 31st December.
33. **Quail:** One flew from beside Peter's boot at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
34. **Moorhen:** Seen on several days.
35. **Purple Swamphen:** At least four seen at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
36. **Common Coot:** Present on larger bodies of water.

37. **Common Crane:** About 10,000 seen on rice fields on 30th December, with smaller numbers near River Tozo on 29th December and several hundred at Talaván on 31st December.
38. **Little Bustard:** About 180 on Belén Plains and 20 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December with about 40 there on 31st December and about 80 at Moheda Alta on 30th December.
39. **Great Bustard:** Five seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 29th December and about eight on 31st December.
40. **Golden Plover:** Present in large numbers (several hundreds) on plains and rice fields.
41. **Lapwing:** Seen almost everyday in large numbers, large concentrations of hundreds of birds at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
42. **Dunlin:** Two or three seen very distantly at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
43. **Common Snipe:** Seen on rice fields on 30th December.
44. **Common Curlew:** Seven at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
45. **Greenshank:** Two on Belén Plains on 29th December and a small party seen distantly at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
46. **Green Sandpiper:** Several sightings, but best views near Arrocampo on 2nd January.
47. **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** seen daily.
48. **Black-headed Gull:** Seen almost daily.
49. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse:** At least 70 seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 31st December.
50. **Feral Pigeon:** Seen almost daily.
51. **Wood Pigeon:** Huge flocks (each number several hundred birds) passing through Monfragüe on 1st January, with smaller numbers seen at other times.
52. **Collared Dove:** Seen almost daily.
53. **Eagle Owl:** Heard once at dusk in Monfragüe on 1st January.
54. **Kingfisher:** Seen almost daily.
55. **Hoopoe:** Seen daily.

56. **Great Spotted Woodpecker:** Heard in Monfragüe and one seen in Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
57. **Calandra Lark:** Seen on the plains on 29th and 31st December.
58. **Crested Lark:** Seen almost daily.
59. **Thekla Lark:** Seen on plains of Belén and Santa Marta de Magasca.
60. **Woodlark:** Small party seen in Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
61. **Skylark:** Large wintering flocks on plains and rice fields.
62. **Crag Martin:** Seen almost daily in suitable habitat.
63. **Barn Swallow:** Two or three present at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
64. **House Martin:** At least one present at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
65. **Meadow Pipit:** Seen almost daily.
66. **Water Pipit:** One seen on rice fields at Vegas Altas on 30th December.
67. **Grey Wagtail:** Seen almost daily in suitable habitat.
68. **White Wagtail:** Seen daily.
69. **Robin:** Seen almost daily.
70. **Bluethroat:** One seen briefly at Casas de Hito on 30th December and a splendid male at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
71. **Black Redstart:** Seen almost daily.
72. **Stonechat:** Seen almost daily.
73. **Black Wheatear:** Excellent views of a female at Cabañas del Castillo on 2nd January.
74. **Blue Rock Thrush:** Seen in Monfragüe and in the Villuercas mountains.
75. **Blackbird:** Seen daily.
76. **Song Thrush:** Seen almost daily.
77. **Redwing:** One in the Villuercas mountains.
78. **Mistle Thrush:** Seen almost daily.

79. **Cetti's Warbler**: Heard in the rice fields on 30th December and excellent views of two at Arrocampo on 2nd January.
80. **Zitting Cisticola**: Brief views in the rice fields and at Arrocampo.
81. **Dartford Warbler**: Excellent views of a female on Belén Plains on 29th December.
82. **Sardinian Warbler**: Seen almost daily.
83. **Blackcap**: Seen almost daily.
84. **Common Chiffchaff**: Abundant and almost ubiquitous.
85. **Firecrest**: Several seen in Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
86. **Long-tailed Tit**: Seen in Villuercas mountains.
87. **Crested Tit**: Heard only in the Villuercas mountains.
88. **Blue Tit**: Seen almost daily.
89. **Great Tit**: Seen almost daily.
90. **Nuthatch**: Several seen in Villuercas mountains.
91. **Short-toed Treecreeper**: One seen in Villuercas mountains.
92. **Penduline Tit**: Memorable views of two at Talaván reservoir on 31st December.
93. **Southern Grey Shrike**: Seen every day.
94. **Jay**: Individuals seen most days.
95. **Azure-winged Magpie**: Parties seen almost every day.
96. **Magpie**: Seen every day.
97. **Red-billed Chough**: Two in Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
98. **Jackdaw**: Seen almost daily.
99. **Raven**: Seen almost daily.
100. **Spotless Starling**: Seen daily.
101. **House Sparrow**: Seen daily.

102. **Spanish Sparrow:** Seen almost everyday. Huge flocks on the rice fields on 30th December.
103. **Tree Sparrow:** a small group seen at Casas del Hito on 30th December.
104. **Red Avadavat:** Large numbers on rice fields on 30th December.
105. **Common Waxbill:** Brief views (Martin only) and heard on rice fields on 30th December.
106. **Chaffinch:** Seen almost daily.
107. **Serin:** Seen on several days in small parties.
108. **Greenfinch:** Seen in small groups on several days, particularly on the plains.
109. **Goldfinch:** Seen every day and large flocks (100+) on plains.
110. **Siskin:** Seen in Villuercas mountains on 2nd January.
111. **Linnet:** Seen almost daily.
112. **Hawfinch:** Seen every day.
113. **Rock Bunting:** One seen along River Almonte on 30th December.
114. **Reed Bunting:** Singles seen on rice fields and at Talaván.
115. **Corn Bunting:** Seen almost every day and in large numbers.

Mammals seen include:

Otter: Tamuja River (29th December) and Talaván (31st December)

Fox: Belén Plains (29th December) and Mohe3da Alta (30th December)

Rabbit: Casa Rural El Recuerdo (31st December) and outskirts of Madrid.

Red Deer: Monfragüe National Park (1st January)