

SPRING BIRDS AND CULTURE TOUR FOR ELING AND CHESTER

23rd May 2010 – 28th May 2010 (return to Madrid 29th May)

Itinerary

23rd May: Midday pick-up from Madrid. Birding at Arrocampo with late afternoon arrival at Casa Rural El Recuerdo

24th May: Plains and wooded valleys around Santa Marta de Magasca. Afternoon visit to Trujillo.

25th May: Morning visit to Monfragüe National Park. Afternoon to Cáceres.

26th May: Plains south of Zorita and rice fields near Madrigalejo.

27th May: Villafranca de los Barros, Alange and Mérida

28th May: Belén Plains, heathland at Jaraicejo and Monfragüe National Park.

29th May: Early morning departure for Madrid.

23rd May 2010

Eling and Chester were met in their hotel in downtown Madrid, having enjoyed the Champions League football match between Inter Milan and Bayern München the previous evening. We found our way out of the city and were soon on the A5 motorway to Extremadura. We reached the village of Saucedilla for a late lunch, in the shade of the visitors' centre for the birding trails at the reservoir of Arrocampo. Close by we checked the reed beds and were rewarded by good views of a male **Little Bittern** (two others were seen later during the visit). Several **Purple Heron** were present whilst **Great Reed**, **Reed**, **Cetti's** and **Savi's Warblers** sang. At another stop nearby, a **Purple Swamphen** was watched as it preened beside the water and above us a fine **Red Kite** soared together with a **Black Kite**, giving us an excellent comparison.

We continued onwards to our final destination, Casa Rural El Recuerdo, just south of the town of Trujillo. It had been a warm afternoon, but the cool interior of the old house, thanks to the thick stone walls, provided a refreshing change.

24th May 2010

It was a fine, sunny day and we headed west from Trujillo towards Cáceres, leaving the motorway to explore the extensive plains around Santa Marta de Magasca. At

our first stop, we found a rather distant group of eight **Great Bustard**, whilst closer to us were several **Montagu's Harriers**, quartering the fields, as well as performing some aerial displays. We drove slowly along a minor road, getting good views of **Corn Buntings**, **Short-toed Calandra** and **Crested Larks**, many with their bills full of green caterpillars. **Rollers** were also present on the roadside wires, and perched on the nest boxes that had been rested for their use. We also found a male **Black-eared Wheatear** and two **Little Owls**. At one stage we stopped to walk and reached a field where thanks to the sheep grazing, the vegetation was quite low. Here a total of about ten **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** were seen. Some on the ground, but better views were obtained of birds in flight. At one stage a **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** circled around us, flying low and fast close-by. As we returned to the car, a **Short-toed Eagle** soared overhead.

We paused briefly in the Tamuja valley where we had excellent views of a **Common Cuckoo**, calling from a wire, at one stage perched close to a **Bee-eater**. A **Thekla Lark** was also seen on the roadside there. In the village of Santa Marta de Magasca we stopped for coffee in the bar on the main square and watched **House Martins** feeding young in nests situated under low eaves.

Heading through the plains to the north, we were rewarded with superb open landscapes as well as a glory of late spring flowers, showing very well this year because of the rather wetter and cooler spring than usual. We came across two **Stone Curlews** and nearby its display calls helped us to locate a male **Little Bustard**, whose head and necked were clearly visible above the tall grass. Another **Great Bustard** was seen as well as **Montagu's Harriers**. Following lunch, we took a walk beside a lavender-lined track, getting three sightings of an immature **Spanish Imperial Eagle**, two **Black Storks** and another **Little Bustard**. As we returned towards Trujillo, flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** lined-up on the fences beside cereal fields.

The rest of the afternoon was spent exploring the wonderful medieval town of Trujillo. We started in the impressive main square, walking past the palace built by the Francisco Pizarro's brother, then the palace built by Orellana, in which Cervantes lived for a period. Hordes of **swifts (Common and Pallid)** chased each other in screaming packs, whilst **White Storks** looked on from their nests on the towers. Continuing along the ramparts, we then entered the narrow streets and little squares dominated by churches and palaces situated below the Moorish castle. The views from the castle were panoramic. From there we descended back to the main square for coffee, before then heading to the Bull Ring to watch and photograph the **Lesser Kestrels** returning to their nests carrying grasshoppers and beetles caught on their hunting forays to the plains.

25th May 2010

It was an overcast morning as we headed north towards the Monfragüe National Park. A **Roller** was seen perched on wires just north of Trujillo. We drove through extensive *dehesa* landscapes, grazing woodland that stretched to the horizon.

Our first stop in the park was opposite the iconic rock face of Peña Falcón. On an adjacent crag a **Black (=Cinereous) Vulture** was perched at the top, whilst

a **GriFFon Vulture** was close to the base. An island opposite had a **Black Stork's** nest close the river Tajo. An adult stood in attendance over two white chicks with large yellow bills. The cloudy skies meant that many of the vultures were reluctant to be airborne and they sat perched on the cliff, some close their nests which had almost fully-grown nestlings. A **Peregrine** passed overhead at one point and a pair of **Egyptian Vultures** was often in view.

After a stop for coffee, we then visited a rock face in the north of the park, the Portilla del Tiétar. Just as we arrived a **Raven** flew overhead calling, and as we remarked this could be a sign of an eagle appearing...sure enough seconds later an adult **Spanish Imperial Eagle** glided overhead. It disappeared behind the rock face, but reappeared shortly afterwards to perch on the skyline: a magnificent view. There it stayed for the entire duration of our stay.

A pair of **White-rumped Swifts** was offered superb views as they wheeled in front of the rock face.

We met a couple of park rangers were undertaking a census and who told us that on that rock face alone, there were 38 **GriFFon Vulture** nests!

We stopped for lunch under the shade of elm trees and nettle-leaf trees, watching the **Azure-winged Magpies** and **Crested Tit**, whilst **European Turtle Doves** were present in a nearby belt of pines.

As we retraced out steps, we had brief views of a **Rock Sparrow** perched on the bridge over the Tajo river, and a party of **Alpine Swifts** were also present there. A short stop at Peña Falcón was perfectly timed to see an adult **Spanish Imperial Eagle** pass over the top of the cliff.

We then drove to the provincial capital Cáceres for a walk around the medieval centre. The churches and palaces are enclosed within the fortified walls built by the Moors. The architecture was superb: we stopped to admire the façade of the Archbishop's palace and some early medieval houses influence by Moorish architecture. **Pallid and Common Swifts, Lesser Kestrels and White Storks** provided the ornithological interest. After coffee in the main square, we made a final stop at the reservoir of Guadiloba to watch **Collared Pratincoles, Little Terns** and **Little Ringed Plovers** on a small island. **Black-winged Stilts** also had chicks, whilst small flocks of **White Storks** searched the grasslands for grasshoppers.

26th May 2010

Today the warm and sunny weather returned and we headed south to the plains near Zorita and then to the rice-growing areas around the town of Madrigalejo.

First stop on the plains was to watch a **Little Owl** perched atop a pile of stones, not much further on we came across a group of about 12 male **Great Bustards**, feeding in a grass field. The light was excellent and we enjoyed good views of their rich and

intricately marked plumage. A couple of male **Little Bustards** were also found in the area, whilst the usual medley of larks, including **Short-toed** and **Calandra** were present. Further along we came across a further four **Great Bustards**, watching them on the ground and in flight. Another **Little Owl** was also seen on a ruined building.

On the rice fields near Palazuelo, we stopped to check a patch of reeds near the village, finding a **Little Bittern**, **Great Reed Warbler**, **Reed Warbler**, **Cetti's Warbler** and **Nightingale**. Crossing the rice fields, we came across a group of 8 **Northern Lapwing**, unexpected at this time of year, as well as six **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**. Excellent views were obtained of two **Collared Pratincoles** and **Roller**, whilst we also found **Little Ringed Plover**, **Gull-billed Tern** and **Bee-eater**. **Golden Orioles** were present beside the River Ruercas, as well as **Red Avadavats** and **Common Waxbill**. At lunch, overlooking a small tank of water, a **Melodious Warbler** was singing. We completed the visit beside the Sierra Brava reservoir where two male and a female **Black-eared Wheatear** were present, as well as small groups of **Lesser Kestrel**.

27th May 2010

The destination today was the Roman city of Mérida (south-west of Trujillo) and its surrounds. We visited first the expanse of vineyards and olive groves near the town of Villafranca de los Barros. As soon as we stopped, we heard two **Rufous Bush Robins** singing and soon we had located first one and then the second, along a small stream running between the vineyards. The birds sang from exposed perches such as the tops of vines, reeds and rushes. Occasionally they gave short song flights as well. Also present in the area was a **Spectacled Warbler**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and a male **Montagu's Harrier**.

From there we visited Alange, walking beside the reservoir below the rock face. **Alpine Swifts** were breeding on the dam, whilst on the cliff face and surrounds we found **Black Wheatear** and **Long-tailed Tit**.

We then travelled onto Mérida where Eling and Chester visited the Roman Theatre and Amphitheatre. This was followed by lunch in one of the street cafes nearby. We then walked through the city, stopping to see the Roman Forum and Temple before reaching the magnificent Roman bridge. As well as being of huge historic interest (it is the longest Roman bridge still standing in the world), it is a great spot for birding. We had good views of **Little Bittern**, **Purple Heron**, **Great Reed Warbler**, **Pallid**, **Common** and **Alpine Swifts**, but pride of place must go the two juvenile **Penduline Tits** found by Eling, which were feeding in a tree close the start of the bridge.

That evening, after dinner, we took an evening walk hoping to see or hear Red-necked Nightjar. Unfortunately, it was quite windy, but we did see two **Scops Owls** close to the lane.

28th May 2010

The final full day of the tour started with a visit to the Belén Plains near Trujillo. This was a good opportunity of getting more photos of birds like **Corn Buntings** and **Crested Larks**, but best of all were three **Great Spotted Cuckoos**. We had close and prolonged views of what were obviously a pair (they were courtship feeding) and an intruding bird, which was sometimes chased away. At one time all three were together in the same field of view! At the same spot, we also saw two **Stone Curlews** as well as a **Great Bustard**.

The **Larks** and **Corn Buntings** were out in strength, as were **Bee-eaters** and **White Storks**. It was a superb morning.

After coffee, we visited the heath land and cork oak woodland near Jaraicejo, where we watched **Thekla Larks**, **Dartford Warblers**, **Short-toed Treecreepers** and **Nuthatches**. **Nightingales** sang beside us whilst we had lunch in the shade beside the Arroyo de la Vid.

We completed the day with a return to Monfragüe, enjoying good views again of all three species of vulture, a pair of **Red-billed Choughs** and a wonderful view of a **Rock Bunting** struggling with a large moth.

29th May 2010

An early departure to take Eling and Chester back to the airport for their travel home.

Species list

Achieving a big "list" was not the objective of the tour, which aimed to give good opportunities for photography, visits to the main historic towns and a relaxing pace. Here are the species seen, which included many specialities of the area.

1. **Little Grebe** Seen on pool on Belén Plains.
2. **Great Crested Grebe** Seen at Arrocampo and pool in rice fields.
3. **Great Cormorant** Three at Arrocampo.
4. **Little Bittern** Three at Arrocampo, one at Palazuelo in rice fields and three males from Roman bridge in Mérida..
5. **Cattle Egret** Seen almost daily.
6. **Little Egret** Seen almost daily.
7. **Grey Heron** Seen on plains near Cáceres.
8. **Purple Heron** Several at Arrocampo and from Roman bridge, Mérida.
9. **Black Stork** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca and on both visits to Monfragüe.
10. **Grey Lag Goose** Three on pool in rice fields.
11. **Mallard** Seen daily.
12. **Black Kite** Common.
13. **Red Kite** Seen at Arrocampo and on Belén Plains.
14. **Egyptian Vulture** Seen at Monfragüe.
15. **Griffon Vulture** Seen almost daily.
16. **Black Vulture** Seen almost daily.
17. **Short-toed Eagle** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
18. **Marsh Harrier** Seen at Arrocampo and the rice fields.

19. **Montagu's Harrier** Seen almost daily.
20. **Common Buzzard** Seen almost daily.
21. **Spanish Imperial Eagle** One juvenile near Santa Marta de Magasca and two adults at Monfragüe.
22. **Booted Eagle** Seen almost daily.
23. **Lesser Kestrel** Seen almost daily.
24. **Common Kestrel** Seen almost daily.
25. **Peregrine Falcon** One seen in Monfragüe.
26. **Red-legged Partridge** Seen almost daily.
27. **Moorhen** Seen at almost daily.
28. **Purple Swamphen** Seen at Arrocampo.
29. **Common Coot** Seen at Arrocampo.
30. **Little Bustard** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca and Zorita plains.
31. **Great Bustard** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca, Zorita plains and Belén plains.
32. **Black-winged Stilt** Seen at Guadiloba reservoir and on the rice fields.
33. **Stone Curlew** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca and the Belén Plains.
34. **Collared Pratincole** Seen at Guadiloba reservoir and on the rice fields.
35. **Little Ringed Plover** Seen at Guadiloba reservoir and on the rice fields.
36. **Northern Lapwing** Eight seen on the rice fields.
37. **Lesser Black-backed Gull** Ten seen on rice fields.
38. **Gull-billed Tern** Seen on rice fields.
39. **Little Tern** Present at Guadiloba reservoir.
40. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** Ten near Santa Marta de Magasca.
41. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** One near Santa Marta de Magasca
42. **Rock Dove** Seen daily.
43. **Wood Pigeon** Singles seen almost daily.
44. **Collared Dove** Seen daily.
45. **European Turtle Dove** Seen almost daily.
46. **Great Spotted Cuckoo** Three together on Belén Plains.
47. **Common Cuckoo** One seen at Santa Marta de Magasca.
48. **Scops Owl** Two seen at Pago de San Clemente.
49. **Little Owl** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca, Zorita plains and Belén plains.
50. **Alpine Swift** Seen almost daily.
51. **Common Swift** Seen daily.
52. **Pallid Swift** Seen almost daily.
53. **White-rumped Swift** Seen at Monfragüe.
54. **Kingfisher** Seen almost daily.
55. **Bee-eater** Common.
56. **Roller** Seen almost daily.
57. **Hoopoe** Common.
58. **Calandra Lark** Common on plains.
59. **Short-toed Lark** Seen on plains.
60. **Crested Lark** Common
61. **Thekla Lark** Common on heath land near Jaraicejo and seen on plains.
62. **Sand Martin** Seen at Arrocampo.
63. **Crag Martin** Seen almost daily.
64. **Barn Swallow** Seen daily.

65. **Red-rumped Swallow** Seen almost daily.
66. **House Martin** Seen daily.
67. **White Wagtail** Seen almost daily.
68. **Wren** Seen at Monfragüe
69. **Nightingale** Seen or heard almost daily.
70. **Rufous Bush Robin** Two seen south of Mérida.
71. **Black Redstart** Seen in Monfragüe.
72. **Stonechat** Seen almost daily.
73. **Black-eared Wheatear** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca, Sierra Brava reservoir and south of Mérida.
74. **Black Wheatear** Seen south of Mérida and in Monfragüe.
75. **Blue Rock Thrush** Seen almost daily.
76. **Blackbird** Seen daily.
77. **Mistle Thrush** Seen in Monfragüe.
78. **Cetti's Warbler** Seen at Arrocampo and near Madrigalejo.
79. **Zitting Cisticola** Seen almost daily.
80. **Savi's Warbler** Seen at Arrocampo.
81. **Reed Warbler** Seen at Arrocampo and the rice fields.
82. **Great Reed Warbler** Seen at Arrocampo and the rice fields.
83. **Melodious Warbler** Seen in the rice fields
84. **Dartford Warbler** Seen near Jaraicejo.
85. **Spectacled Warbler** Seen near Mérida.
86. **Subalpine Warbler** Seen near Jaraicejo.
87. **Sardinian Warbler** Seen or heard almost daily.
88. **Long-tailed Tit** Seen near Alange.
89. **Crested Tit** Seen in Monfragüe.
90. **Blue Tit** Seen almost daily.
91. **Great Tit** Seen almost daily.
92. **Nuthatch** Seen near Jaraicejo.
93. **Short-toed Treecreeper** Seen near Jaraicejo.
94. **Penduline Tit** Two juveniles off Roman bridge, Mérida.
95. **Golden Oriole** Seen on rice fields
96. **Southern Grey Shrike** Seen almost daily.
97. **Woodchat Shrike** Seen almost daily.
98. **Jay** Seen at Monfragüe.
99. **Azure-winged Magpie** Seen daily.
100. **Magpie** Seen daily.
101. **Red-billed Chough** Seen in Monfragüe.
102. **Jackdaw** Seen almost daily.
103. **Raven** Seen daily.
104. **Spotless Starling** Seen daily.
105. **House Sparrow** Seen daily.
106. **Spanish Sparrow** Seen almost daily.
107. **Tree Sparrow** Seen on rice fields.
108. **Rock Sparrow** Seen at Monfragüe and on rice fields.
109. **Common Waxbill** Seen briefly near rice fields.
110. **Red Avadavat** Seen on rice fields.
111. **Chaffinch** Seen almost daily.
112. **Serin** Seen almost daily.
113. **Greenfinch** Seen almost daily.

- 114. **Goldfinch** Seen almost daily.
- 115. **Linnet** Seen almost daily.
- 116. **Hawfinch** Seen briefly at Monfragüe.
- 117. **Rock Bunting** Seen at Monfragüe.
- 118. **Corn Bunting** Abundant, seen daily.