Extremadura Trip 6th-13th October 2010

We flew from Bristol to Madrid and hired a car with car hire 3000. It was very reasonable with return flights and car hire costing around £110 each. After some expert navigation and 250km we arrived at our accommodation at around 1am on Thursday the 7th. We were staying at Casa Rural el Recuerdo which is situated around 10km south of Trujillo. We were welcomed in and got our heads down with high hopes for the week.

Thursday 7th October

I set the alarm a little early as it was still dark when we woke. While I led there, as well as the ringing of bells from the sheep a distinctive harsh magpie like call was clear. I said to Greg that maybe they are Azure Winged and as I opened the shutters the first bird I got my blurry eyes on was indeed a beautiful AZURE WINGED MAGPIE just outside the window! Greg was up in an instant and it turned out there was a party of around 6-8 of them. It was a cracking start and we were raring to get outside and explore the area.

On leaving the front door and looking to the skies there were some hirundines in the air and we soon picked up our first RED RUMPED SWALLOW with House Martin and Barn Swallow also seen. The next birds on the list were 5 HAWFINCH which flew overhead calling as they headed for a large pine tree. Hawfinch were to prove very abundant indeed which is great to see. It was apparent very quickly that there were lots of birds in the area. Our first HOOPOE gave a fantastic flyby directly over our heads and we soon added Spotless Startling, Spanish Sparrow and House Sparrow to the list.





The surrounding area consisted of olive groves with a few mature trees and some good hedgerows. These hedgerows held our first SARDINIAN WARBLER of the week calling away and showing well with its clear cut black head with red eye ring.

Being here in October meant it was going to be a good time for migrants and on closer inspection of the hedgerows there were at least 3 Pied Flycatcher and a single Common Redstart with Stonechat present and 3 Blackcap. There was always something to look at, the noisy group of Azure Winged Magpie were great to watch and the Hoopoe seemed to be following us! Continuing along the track we noted some of the commoner species with Blue tit, Great Tit, Goldfinch and Greenfinch seen with more Hawfinch flying over head regularly. As we came to an open area we scanned the field below and added Corn Bunting, Common Magpie and Blackbird with our first SOUTHERN GREY SHRIKE perched on wires. The birds were everywhere and 3 more Hoopoe were seen here. We headed back along the track to the car seeing our first raptor of the week in the form of a Red kite drifting over head.

We now headed for the Steppe lands just outside Trujillo and were soon walking along a dusty track with birds everywhere. There was a great amount of larks and buntings and we spent time here identifying them and taking some photos. We managed to identify both CRESTED LARK and THEKLA LARK and though they are very similar birds there are subtle differences most notably the bill shape.





Thekla Lark



There were flocks of Corn bunting zipping overhead and Northern Wheatear were in the fields. The amount of birds was quite amazing. We walked slowly along this track and watched yet another Hoopoe feeding and saw a Sparrowhawk and a Marsh Harrier.

An unfamiliar bird flying overhead was soon identified as our first target Steppe bird. It was a BLACK BELLIED SANDGROUSE and a single bird was seen on 3 occasions. In the cattle field there were lots of Spotless Starlings as well as a few Lapwing and our first 2 CALANDRA LARKS though they were distant. We then noticed a very bright pipit drop into the field and our only TAWNY PIPIT of the week was identified. It surprised me just how yellow it appeared!





On reaching the end of the track we saw some huge birds gaining height in the distance. They were our first Vultures and as they got closer we could see both GRIFFON VULTURES and a BLACK VULTURE overhead. Extremely impressive, mighty birds!

On returning to the car we had a Willow Warbler and then continued on our way. You really can't drive far here without stopping for something. There are always Corn Buntings, Larks, Chats and Wheatears on the wires. We stopped to admire our first Whinchat and as we were watching it from the car a WRYNECK flitted up next to it and we watched it flying between the olive trees. It's always a thrill to see these great birds!

We continued on seeing an impressive Black Vulture fly low over the car and we stopped off many times to scan for birds. On one such stop I spotted a group of 7 GREAT BUSTARD walking slowly across the field.

They are huge birds and this was realised even more when a man walking nearby caused them to fly directly over our heads allowing Greg to get some great shots. The luck really was with us!





Great Bustard



We also connected here with our second grouse species as a flock of 15 PINTAILED SANDGROUSE flew overhead giving their bubbly call as they went. Greg then spotted a lovely HEN HARRIER quartering the field and again Wheatears were everywhere. As we drove on we had our first confirmed LESSER KESTREL on the wire well photographed by Greg out the window as it took off.

Lesser Kestrel



After a fantastic first days birding we headed back to the accomodation. Around the village we saw 5 SERIN feeding along with a cracking SUBALPINE WARBLER showing well in an olive tree just outside the garden. It was a fantastic scene with Azure Winged Magpie feeding in the same view as Hoopoe. The area was so productive.

Azure Winged Magpie



We finished the day with a SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER seemingly going to roost. I was again surprised at how distinctly dark the belly was on this bird.

Short-toed Treecreeper



It was a day of many firsts and brilliant moments, we hit the sack and couldn't wait to get back out there.

Friday 8th October

Today we decided to travel south to the rice fields near Vegas Altas. Martin gave us some great advice on Little Bustard and we set off. Our first stop was to watch our first WHITE STORK and along a ditch nearby we noticed a RED AVADAVAT carrying nesting material.

We stopped again at a productive looking spot and we soon noticed a large group of LITTLE BUSTARD walking across the field. We realised then that they were next to the Tomato field we were told about. It was another bird we really hoped to see and we counted 54 in total as they got up a flew a short distance across the road. 15 Great Bustard were also seen flying on the horizon.

Little Bustard



We continued to drive around the fields near Vegas Altas and stopped to look across the fields of White Stork with quartering Marsh Harriers all over the place.

White Stork



Cattle Egret were abundant with a few Little Egret and of course Hoopoes were seen with more Southern Grey Shrikes! There was always something to look at and in a particularly wet field we had some waders in the form of 4 Snipe and 2 Green Sandpiper. ZITTING CISTICOLA were also seen here in the long vegetation. It appeared however we were slightly early for the Cranes though they were expected any time.

We drove around these fields and then headed to the dam at Embalse de Sierra Brava. On a pool of water en route we saw a Kingfisher and Greg spotted a Crayfish in the Water. It was apparent on arriving that there was actually not much to see on the reservoir itself other than a few Great Crested Grebe and lots of Coots. We searched the area around the reservoir looking for snakes but unfortunately had no joy. We did however find a SCORPION under a rock and watched a PRAYING MANTIS eating a Dragonfly alive! Such an amazing predatory insect! It was pretty gruesome watching it munching away as the helpless dragonfly continued to buzz!





Praying Mantis eating a Dragonfly



Grey Wagtail and Cormorants were also seen along with a Common Sandpiper. A Swallowtail butterfly was seen and photographed here.

Swallowtail Butterfly



As we had a bit of time we decided to head to the Castas de Histos Ricefields and on route stopped off as we saw a large group of Vultures on the ground. The birds were feeding on a carcass and it as great to see them squabbling and bounding around. There was just 1 Black Vulture with at least 30 Griffon Vultures. They all started to take to the air and it was brilliant to see these huge birds running along before taking to the sky.

Continuing to the rice fields along a dusty track we saw Little Ringed Plover, Yellow Wagtails in with the sheep a Little Owl and a Marsh Harrier. A COMMON WAXBILL was also seen in the reeds.

We now headed to the Square in Trujillo as we had been told that some Pallid Swift were still around stopping once more to watch a Spotted Flycatcher and Pied Flycatcher together on the fence and another Praying Mantis.

We spent some time in the central Square in Trujillo and although we didn't see any Pallid Swift we did see lots of Red Rumped Swallows perched under a balcony with some CRAG MARTIN with them. It was nice to see them perched and flying low overhead.





To finish the day we drove to the Steppelands again and saw 2 Great Bustards in flight, a distant flock of Sandgrouse thought to be pintailed and we rounded off the evening with another Hen Harrier hunting.

Saturday 9th October

Today we headed to the Arrocampo reservoir around 50km back towards Madrid along the E90. The weather was not supposed to be great so we thought a reservoir would be the best idea. There were a few very heavy downpours during the day but on the whole it didn't hinder us too much.

The day got off to an exiting start. As we were driving along the main E90 I spotted a bird up ahead and it dropped down into a field. As we went past I looked across to see what looked to be a Black Stork next to a small pool. Luck was with us as there was a parking area just past the spot and we pulled in. The main road was busy so we made the decision to hop over a fence and walk along a disused road running directly alongside. Sure enough there was the BLACK STORK stood next to the pool. We took some quick photos as we noticed a van was approaching! The bird was flushed right over our heads allowing some flight shots. Even though we weren't in his field the farmer did not look to happy so we made a hasty retreat back over the fence and hit the road. Black Stork in the bag and we were on our way.

Black Stork (Juvenile)



Arriving at Arrocampo we scanned the reservoir and soon picked up 2 distant PURPLE SWAMPHEN. Marsh Harriers were over the reeds and we picked up a single Sedge Warbler. Cetti's Warblers were calling all over the place and occasionally showing to allow excellent views. Walking around the long sedge grasses we saw many Zitting Cisticola, Stonechat and more Willow Warblers. I saw a bird fly past and caught its rusty patches above the tail. It was our first BLUETHROAT but was proving very elusive. We moved on to scan from outside a hide (as the doors were locked) and from here had far better views of 2 Bluethroat. They were chasing each other around and allowed us to get some good scoped views.

We drove to the next hide and scanned the corner of the reservoir for a while. Here we had excellent views of another Purple Swamphen. It was showing well in the reeds and was calling loudly.

Purple Swamphen



This area was alive with Warblers but they all appeared to be Willow Warbler with just one Reed Warbler the exception. Another Southern Grey Shrike was seen nearby.

Southern Grey Shrike



On a short walk a smart BLACK SHOULDERED KITE was seen and 3 COMMON CRANE were seen in the distance. Could these be the first 3 of the 70,000 that winter here arriving?

We drove a scenic route home which involved passing through Monfrague National park. We had close up views of Cattle Egret before stopping near Serrejon.

Cattle Egret



On a short walk we saw many Chaffinch, more Pied Flycatcher a single Common Redstart and our first FIRECREST. A little gem! Walking in these fields was risky as there were many Bulls.

Arriving into Monfrague we stopped first at Portilla Del Tietar and watched the Griffon Vultures cruising overhead and coming into land on the rock face.

Griffon Vulture



It really is quite a spectacle and a single Black Vulture joined them! You can here the wind rushing over heir wings as they stoop in. Magic! Here we also spotted a BLUE ROCK THRUSHand a BLACK REDSTART. We

waited at this spot and saw an adult Black Stork fly in which circled for a while before departing. It had bright red legs and bill in contrast to the earlier bird which was a juvenile. We also saw 2 more Firecrest flitting in the hedges.

Driving further along the track we saw a very tame Fox and Red Deer were very abundant.

We waited to try and hear the Eagle owls but with very windy conditions decided to head for home. Another excellent day with some great birds seen.

Sunday 10th October

We started the day by watching 10 – 12 Hawfinch outside the accommodation and then headed into the mountains of Seirra de Villercas. On the first stop off our first ROCK BUNTING was seen and a WOODLARK was singing on the wires nearby.

We made our way slowly to Cabanas del Castillo and climbed to the Castle at the very top. The weather was not great but it cleared to allow us to see the incredible views. We saw 3 Black Redstart, 2 Blue Rock Thrush and many Crag Martins flying around our heads but failed to spot our target bird the Black Wheatear. Being so high up with nothing but stunning scenery in every direction and Vultures cruising along the valley was quite amazing.

Greg on the edge!



Continuing along the road we stopped to scan the crags and after seeing so many Vultures it was obvious when 2 Eagles drifted overhead. We think they were BONELLI'S EAGLE but it is hard to be 100% as they

moved over quite quickly. Great to see all the same! Another party of Azure Winged Magpie was seen here with Mistle Thrush and Jay noted.

On the drive Back towards Trujillo Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler and Whinchat were all seen and we decided now to head for a couple of well earned beers in the square whilst looking for Swifts overhead. Not long passed before a Swift was dashing around the church tower and we took some photos of our first PALLID SWIFT with a crop full of insects! A Crag Martin was sat on a building nearby.

Pallid Swift







We sat here watching the Swifts, Swallows and Martins and noticed another Eagle drifting overhead. We noted down its features and took a couple of record shots. It was a pale phase BOOTED EAGLE and a great addition to the growing list.

We watched some local traditions as horses were ridden into the square to drink from the fountain and we spotted a flock of 10 SPOONBILL migrating high overhead. It was a very productive session here, sat with a lovely bottle of San Miguel watching the skies above full of great birds! Definately recommended!

We had a cracking meal back at the accommodation and with the weather set to improve it was Monfrague in the morning!

Monday 11th October

We set off for Monfrague after getting some provisions from the supermarket and arrived at Pena Falcon at around 10.30. The views were awesome and the cliff was covered in Vultures with many soaring above.





A Hoopoe was seen high in the mountains and more Blue Rock thrush were seen with 4 Black Redstart. One of which showing very well in stunning plumage.

Blue Rock Thrush



Black Redstart

Wallcreeper



What was to happen next was the highlight of the trip for me. As I was looking from the viewpoint at Pena Falcon over the river a small bird flew across the road. Immediately I knew it was a WALLCREEPER. That beautiful butterfly like flight with its bright red wing patches catching the light! I shouted to Greg and we ran to look at the rock face just around the corner. Sure enough there it was, a real gem of a bird. One I have always wanted to see. It was working up the rock face feeding as it went and fluttering to navigate the vertical cliffs and overhangs. We watched the bird getting scoped views and taking some photos before it went out of sight. It was a brilliant moment and will never be forgotten. This was a total bonus as there are very few records of Wallcreeper that far south although I expect for every one seen many would go unnoticed!







Once we could finally drag ourselves from staring at the lichen covered cliff face we watched 2 BLACK WHEATEAR on the slopes opposite and also picked out a single WHITE RUMPED SWIFT overhead amongst the many Crag and House Martin. We had good views through the scope and it was yet another target bird seen. It was great to be conecting with so many of our target birds. What a start to the day!

We stayed here a while longer and watched a Short-toed Treecreeper creeping up the rock face rather than the trees and a Peregrine Falcon and a singing Wren were noted. We now decided to drive to Portilla del Tirtar and en route we searched again for snakes in a perfect area but only found Lizards and a very long Snake

skin. We watched the Vultures at Tietar for a while and a single Eagle species drifted overhead but gave us all too brief views to get a positive ID unfortunately. It may have been our Spanish Imperial but we just couldn't tell. In the bushes there seemed to be far more Robins around and we had cracking views of 3 Firecrest. Two were being quite aggressive towards each other raising their crowns.

Firecrest



We now drove back to the wooded area near the dam and watched around 25 Hawfinch along with a party of Azure Winged Magpie and a single CRESTED TIT before heading back to Portilla Del Tietar for the evening in the hope of Eagle Owl. Again we weren't in luck on the Owl front staying until it was dark hoping that they would call. As darkness fell we could see the silhouettes of 2 NIGHTJARS flying just above the ridge. It was not known which species. The sounds of the Red Deer rutting across the valley was amazing and Grey Herons were chasing eachother up and down the river. We headed for home stopping to let Red Deer cross both extremely happy with another cracking day. We had already decided to head back in the morning!

Tuesday 12th October

After watching the Azure Winged Magpies feeding on our windowsill we headed back to Monfrague.

Azure Winged Magpie



We watched a stunning singing Black Redstart and a pristine Black Vulture flew overhead. A Rock Bunting was showing very well nearby almost posing for the camera.

Black Vulture



Rock Bunting



We now drove towards the woodland by the dam again and stopped to scan the area en route. Our first and only EGYPTAIN VULTURE was seen here gliding overhead and there were singing Woodlarks and a Sardinian Warbler nearby.

Egyptian Vulture



We searched again in vain for snakes and In the woodland saw 4 Crested Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker,

Nuthatch and Pied Flycatcher with a skein of Greylag Geese high overhead.

Crested Tit



Greg spotted 2 Serin nearby and we had our closest ever views of a Griffon Vulture circling over our heads. Just amazing!

Griffon Vulture



We then picked a spot to scan for eagles near Tietar but again had no joy. It was always going to be a bit hit or miss for Spanish Imperial but we really had nothing to complain about. We saw a Sparrowhawk circling and a Black Vulture gave a great flyover with 2 more Black Storks circling high above the vultures.

We now decided to find the Belen plains near Trujillo and spent the rest of the evening there. We found this tiny town with no problems and drove along the very long road cutting through the Steppelands on the otherside. It was brilliant and the area was full of birds! It seems like their farming techiques allow for the birds to flourish in the area. Huge flocks of Sparrows with Shrikes, Corn Buntings and Larks everywhere. We stopped very regularly to scan the fields as we had learnt quickly that this is vital to get onto the birds. Greg made a brilliant pick up of 2 STONE CURLEW sat in the field though they were distant and the heat haze wasn't helping. We continued along the track with birds on the fences not even flying as we drove past. We counted at least 20 Whinchat, 35 Stonechat, 50 Corn Bunting, 20 Wheatear, 15 Calandra Lark and 3 Hoopoes with 2 together.

Whinchat



Stonechat



Corn Bunting



These numbers were just of birds on the wires or very nearby as we drove slowly along. It was lovely afternoon sun and as we scanned the fields it was the sound of beating wings which first alerted us to the flock of 35 Little Bustard that were flying overhead.

Little Bustard



Little Bustard overhead



We watched a cracking female MERLIN hunting close to the road, and Common Kestrel were also nearby. We watched a group of 8 Great Bustard walking across the field and just enjoyed the superb birding. As we passed a small farm we noticed 2 Stone Curlew take to the air. As we watched on, more and more were seen and it was a truley incredible sight as a flock of 30 Stone Curew flew across the fields! A few stayed near the road to allow for photos.

Stone Curlew (it is hard to make out but there is 11 Stone Curlew in the shot)



Stone Curew (A little easier to spot)



Amazing birds! As the evening drew on a Little Owl was spotted and a Red Kite was seen to be going to roost.

As we drove back along the track the eerie calls of the Stone Curlew was ringing out across the fields. Another great day and we weren't looking forward to having to leave the next day. We had made a note of every

Hoopoe seen and the total by the end of the day was 12!

Wednesday 13th October

Unfortunatley It was our last day but we had some time for birding before our evening flight back to Bristol.

In keeping with the rest of the week we woke to the Azure Winged Magpies on the windowsill and there were 2 Hawfinch feeding on the floor giving excellent views. We went for a final walk around the accommodation seeing a female Sardinian Warbler and commenting on the apparent arrival of Song Thrush as they seemed to be darting from bushes all over the place.

After saying farewell to Claudia we headed back to the Belen Plains and drove along the entire road before getting on the E90 towards <?Madrid. The area was again fruitful with 7 Great Bustard seen and we finally had views of Calandra Lark feeding in the fields. A Hen Harrier flew across the road and Marsh Harrier, Red Kite, Black and Griffon Vulture were all seen.

We then had another Eagle to try and sort out. It was a large bird circling at a height which allowed features and colours to be seen. Referring to the book as we watched and noting features it struck us both as looking like a Short toed eagle. The very pale almost completely white underside and clear 2 tones of brown on the

uperwings meant we were confident but still reluctant to say 100%. The bird did hover for a short time and we enjoyed watching the bird and trying to identify it. Anyone with experience of these birds would no doubt have been able to say with little trouble as it as not that distant. Juvenile Short toed Eagle was certainly what it appeared to be.

Continuing along the track we had brilliant views of first a Hoopoe posing and looking at us in the car then a Little Owl seemed unnerved by our presence and then to top it off a cracking adult WOODCHAT SHRIKE. It was as if the birds had never seen a car before and just didn't feel the need to fly off! Great Stuff! It really was one great bird to the next.

Hoopoe



Little Owl



Woodchat Shrike



All the usuall migrants were seen and a White Wagtail was close to the road.

We decided to go to Arrocampo for another look as it was on the way back and there were now a steady passage of Common Crane overhead with the largest flock being 35. Their distinctive call was heard, alerting us to their presence.

Common Crane



There were so many birds in the air! Huge amounts of Vultures, White Storks circling and the Cranes passing steadilly overhead. We went for a walk again seeing a Black Shouldered Kite and a Purple Swamphen flew across the reservoir. We turned some more rocks and found a huge Centipede and I turned over a bin to reveal a small snake which disappeared before we could get a good look. It is addictive turning things over to see

what is hidden beneath. Usually it is an Ants nest but every now an again a Scorpion, Spider or some sort of creepy crawly is uncovered.

We watched the Marsh Harriers over the reeds and Vultures overhead before heading for Madrid. Even When we thought the birding as over as we got onto the main road a PURPLE HERON flew across in front of us! We managed to get safely back to the car drop of point after getting caught up in the middle of Madrid's rush hour. We will definitely research the roads to get back to the airport better next time!

It was a fantastic weeks birding with 1700km covered and some brilliant birds seen. A big thank you to Martin and Claudia for their hospitality. If you are to go birding in the region there surely can be no better place to stay.

Tom and Greg Mabbett

Bird List for the Week:

1.	A	\A/:		Magpie
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- 2. Common Magpie
- 3. **Jay**
- 4. House Sparrow
- 5. **Spanish Sparrow**
- 6. Hoopoe
- 7. Sardinian Warbler
- 8. Subalpine Warbler
- 9. Cetti's Warbler
- 10. Sedge Warbler
- 11. Willow Warbler
- 12. Reed Warbler
- 13. Blackcap
- 14. Common Whitethroat
- 15. Spottless Starling
- 16. European Starling
- 17. Collared Dove
- 18. Wood Pigeon
- 19. Common Redstart
- 20. Black Redstart

- 21. Pied Flycathcer
- 22. Spotted Flycathcer
- 23. Whinchat
- 24. Stonechat
- 25. Corn Bunting
- 26. Rock Bunting
- 27. Crested Lark
- 28. Thekla Lark
- 29. Calandra Lark
- 30. Meadow Pipit
- 31. Tawny Pipit
- 32. Blue Tit
- 33. Great Tit
- 34. Long Tailed Tit
- 35. Coal Tit
- 36. Crested Tit
- 37. Firecrest
- 38. **Wren**
- 39. Hawfinch
- 40. Chaffinch
- 41. Greenfinch
- 42. Goldfinch
- 43. **Serin**
- 44. Blackbird
- 45. **Song Thrush**
- 46. Mistle Thrush
- 47. Blue Rock Thrush
- 48. Marsh Harrier
- 49. Hen Harrier
- 50. Common Kestrel
- 51. Lesser Kestrel
- 52. Merlin

- 53. **Peregrine Falcon**
- 54. **Griffon Vulture**
- 55. Black Vulture
- 56. Egyptian Vulture
- 57. Bonelli's Eagle
- 58. Booted eagle
- 59. Short Toed Eagle
- 60. Common Buzzard
- 61. **Sparrowhawk**
- 62. Red Kite
- 63. Black Shouldered Kite
- 64. Little Owl
- 65. Black Bellied Sandgrouse
- 66. Pin Tailed Sandgrouse
- 67. **Great Bustard**
- 68. Little Bustard
- 69. Stone Curlew
- 70. Nortern Wheatear
- 71. Black Wheatear
- 72. Bluethroat
- 73. Short Toed Treecreeper
- 74. Wallcreeper
- 75. White Stork
- 76. Black Stork
- 77. Common Crane
- 78. Cattle Egret
- 79. Little Egret
- 80. Grey Heron
- 81. **Purple Heron**
- 82. Great Spotted Woodpecker
- 83. Wryneck
- 84. Nuthatch

- 85. Southern Grey Shrike
- 86. Woodchat Shrike
- 87. Red Avadavat
- 88. Comon Waxbill
- 89. Zitting Cisticola
- 90. White Wagtail
- 91. Yellow Wagtail
- 92. Grey Wagtail
- 93. **Common Sandpiper**
- 94. **Green Sandpiper**
- 95. Common Snipe
- 96. Little Ringed Plover
- 97. Ringed Plover
- 98. Red Rumped Swallow
- 99. Barn Swallow
- 100. House Martin
- 101. Crag Martin
- 102. Pallid Swift
- 103. White Rumped Swift
- 104. Kingfisher
- 105. **Cormorant**
- 106. Purple Swamphen
- 107. **Coot**
- 108. **Moorhen**
- 109. Great Crested Grebe
- 110. **Mallard**
- 111. Gadwall
- 112. Black Headed Gull
- 113. Lesser Black Backed Gull
- 114. Nightjar Species
- 115. Red Legged Partridge