

## **Birding Extremadura and Casa Rural El Recuerdo**

### **WINTER TOUR 15<sup>th</sup>– 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011**

**Guests: Fred and Win Bridges**

**Guide: Martin Kelsey**

#### **Itinerary**

15<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Collection in morning at Charmartín railway station in Madrid Airport and transfer to Casa Rural El Recuerdo, Pago de San Clemente, Trujillo, with afternoon stop at Arrocampo reservoir.

16<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Free day

17<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Monfragüe National Park.

18<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Villuercas mountains

19<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Plains near Santa Marta de Magasca and Monfragüe National Park.

20<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Sierra Brava Reservoir (south of Zorita) and the rice-growing area near Madrigalejo (Casas del Hito, Vegas Altas, Moheda Alta and Palazuelo).

21<sup>st</sup> January 2011: Morning on Belén Plains and afternoon transfer to Charmartín railway station in Madrid

## TRIP REPORT

**15<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

Fred and Win's train from Paris arrived only slightly delayed at Madrid's Charmartín station, where Martin was waiting for them. We set off through light Saturday morning traffic across Madrid, getting onto the ring-road and then the A5 motorway south-west to Extremadura. The weather was fine with sunshine and we made very good progress, stopping for lunch near the village of Saucedilla. This was on the doorstep of our afternoon's birding at the wetland of Arrocampo.



The extensive reed mace fringe to this reservoir provides excellent habitat for species like the **Purple Swamphen** and we had several sightings, including prolonged views of one preening and sunning close-by.

In the same area a male **Penduline Tit** was watched feeding on the reed mace seed heads, the sun catching its dark reddish-brown back gloriously. We crossed more open country, with Fred spotting a **Black-winged Kite** perched on a dead tree, and we also stopped to watch some **Spanish Sparrows** feeding in the shade of holm oaks. Nearby we had superb views of a pair of **Bonelli's Eagle** soaring at low height, with a flock of **Jackdaws** flying in alarm nearby. Back at the reservoir, we returned to one of the hides, watching a group of **Curlew** and **Grey Heron** standing in a cereal field together. From the hide, we heard the characteristic snipping call of a **Bluethroat**, but unfortunately it did not want to show itself. With time now passing, we returned to the motorway

and forty minutes later arrived at Casa Rural El Recuerdo, in time for some refreshments and dinner.



### 17<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Heading north from Trujillo, we crossed landscapes of *dehesa*, the evergreen oak grazing woodland which dominates much of this part of Extremadura. Ahead of the small town of Torrejón el Rubio lie the rocky escarpments of the Monfragüe National Park, where rocky gorges have been created by the great Tajo and Tiétar rivers. We stopped at the first gorge, where the massive Peña Falcon cliff was capped in mist. The low mist stayed with us all day, which meant that many of the large birds of prey, especially the vultures spent most of the time perched. Dozens of **Griffon Vultures** stood hunched on the cliff face. Moving onto another gorge, the Portilla del Tiétar, Fred obtained a good series of recordings of **Griffon Vultures**, a pair of **Ravens** and then, the prize above all, the barking call of **Spanish Imperial Eagle**. This bird had been sitting on a tree nearby and then approached the cliff, calling as it did so. We also had good views of **Black Vultures**, as well as an **Otter** fishing in the river below us.

We repaired to the bar in the hamlet of Villarreal de San Carlos for lunch and then took a walk beside the River Tajo. The mixed woodland here was full of **Blackcaps** and we also had brief glimpses of a **Firecrest**. After a return to Villarreal for coffee and to see the exhibition about the park, we waited by the bridge crossing the Tajo river to watch at least 200 **Rock Sparrows** flying into roost. Smaller parties of **House Martins** were also present. From there we

returned to our first stop, Peña Falcon, as light was fading to attempt to get sound recordings of **Eagle Owl**. The mist was still hugging the top of the cliff and although we did hear the Eagle Owl, the call was fairly distant.



### **18<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

It was another calm, windless day, the result of which was banks of dense fog on low-lying ground, so we decided to head for the hills in an attempt to find sunshine. We drove first to the highest point of the Villuercas mountains, at 1600 metres, overlooking the historic town of Guadalupe and affording us breathtaking views in all directions. Although there were not many small birds to be found, we did have the unusual experience of watching a soaring juvenile **Golden Eagle** from above. However it was the spectacular scenery which really stole the show. We descended to have coffee in the small town of Cañamero and then drove along the western flank of the Villuercas mountains, stopping in a belt of Cork Oak woodland north of the village of Solano. This habitat is scenically very attractive and through the gaps in the trees we could look across miles and miles of wooded hills and secluded rivers valleys. Fred was able to get good recordings of **Nuthatch** and we also saw **Short-toed Treecreeper**. Finally we had an afternoon walk around the village of Cabañas del Castillo, which lies at the base of two great crags. The place thronged with **Blackcaps** and **Song Thrushes**, attracted by the large crop of olives in the small-holdings near the village, whilst the crags held plentiful **Black Redstart** and a **Blue Rock Thrush**.



**19<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

The fog had dissipated, enabling us to venture out onto the plains lying between Trujillo and Cáceres. We first of all birded on the area to the east of the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. Highlights included a large flock of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** and a few **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, one of which flew low overhead calling. A small party of **Little Bustard** were found, at some distance away and largely concealed by the withered stems of last summer's thistles. However, we had much better views of a group of **Great Bustard**, including a male which thought that spring had arrived and was practising some of his display moves! After morning coffee in a friendly bar in the village, we visited an area of plains to the south of the village, finding a **Little Owl** and a large party of **Black-headed** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** on a pool. Driving slowing across the plains and through wooded areas, we marvelled at the frequency of **Hoopoes**, sometimes in pairs, flying up from the roadside verge or settled on the fence posts. We stopped for lunch beside the River Magasca. As well as enjoying the sight of two **Golden Eagles** soaring downstream, we also were very pleased with fly-pasts of probably at least four Kingfishers along the river. After a stop beside the River Almonte and coffee in Monroy, we then moved back to the Monfragüe National Park for another attempt to record **Eagle Owl** calls. This time we went to the Portilla del Tiétar. It was a perfect evening – almost still, no sign of mist and with great visibility. Just as we arrived we heard a single hoot, but then it was another 25 minutes before the owl started calling again. Whilst we waited we watched the **Spanish Imperial Eagle** go to roost and as dusk fell, a **Merlin** flew high overhead. As soon as the **Eagle Owl** started calling, we found it perched against the skyline near the top of the cliff. It

was a magnificent view and the bird continued calling for at least half an hour. Indeed, it was still calling as we dragged ourselves away as darkness fell. A wonderful finale to a superb day...and just as we reached home, a **Little Owl** was calling near the garden.

## 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Another fog-free day, although there was a slight haze in the sky, but it was calm and very mild. We headed south to the rice-growing area near the town of Madrigalejo. We stopped first to view the Sierra Brava reservoir, the surface of which was perfectly calm. Here tens of thousands of dabbling duck roost and the rafts of **Shoveler, Mallard, Wigeon, Gadwall** and **Pintail** lay like carpets across the water's surface. We then descended to rice fields, seeing a hovering **Black-winged Kite** on the way, where parties of **Common Cranes** were feeding. On a small irrigation tank, hundreds of **Grey Lag Geese** were dozing whilst perhaps a thousand **Pintail** were swimming. After coffee, we explored arable land near Vegas Altas, finding along with the hundreds of **Common Crane** a magnificent party of about 80 **Great Bustards**. From there we visited the crane centre at Moheda Alta, enjoying a picnic lunch in the *dehesa*, where early spring flowers were already in bloom.



Nearby a tower hide gave us wonderful views of hundreds of **Common Cranes** feeding on the rice stubble, as well as smaller numbers of **Grey Lag Geese**. Unfortunately the enjoyment was dimmed slightly by the fact that the Spanish Air Force had opted to do some practice dogfights above us and a couple of sonic booms did disturb the cranes. Nearby we visited another irrigation tank,

which had a pair of **Red-crested Pochard**, as well as a large mixed flock of **Spanish Sparrow** and the tiny exotic **Red Avadavat**.

Finally we explored the wet fields near Palazuelo. There were thousands of **Lapwing** and also hundreds of **Golden Plover** in fields beside the road. We stopped to check out a group of feeding waders, finding at least 12 **Kentish Plover**, a **Spotted Redshank** and parties of **Dunlin**, amongst others. As the sun was getting lower, we stopped to walk along a track where we were treated with memorable views of a fine **Bluethroat**, which perched several times on a concrete-lined channel, at one stage preening its breast in the afternoon sunshine. Back home, after dinner, Fred ventured out in the olive grove, where **Natterjack Toads** and **Little Owls** were calling.

### **21<sup>st</sup> January 2011**

It was a wonderfully clear morning, the visibility crystal sharp as we visited the plains of Belén, the backdrop of the snowed-capped Gredos mountains so clear that it was hard to believe that they were actually about 100 kms away.



As well as more wonderful views of **Hoopoe** we found a small party of **Little Bustards** in a field next to the road, much closer than the birds seen a few days earlier. A **Merlin** was watched dashing past and Fred spotted some very distant **Great Bustards**. Finding a viewpoint on higher ground we relocated the **Great**

**Bustards**, found another flock of them a wee bit closer as well as another group of **Little Bustard**.



But pride of place must go to a superb **Red Kite** which wheeled close by in excellent light, all its marking clearly visible. It was a fine way to end the morning.

After lunch sitting in the courtyard at Casa Rural El Recuerdo, we headed back to Madrid, reaching the railway station concourse in exactly three hours, as predicted!

### **List of species seen**

Particular attention was made on this holiday to obtain sound recordings of birds, rather than maximising a species list, nevertheless a very good total of **119 species of birds were noted**. These are listed below.

1. **Little Grebe:** Seen at Arrocampo and in the San Lazaro park in Trujillo.
2. **Great Crested Grebe:** Seen at Sierra Brava reservoir on 20th January.

3. **Great Cormorant:** Seen most days, with largest number seen in Monfragüe National Park.
4. **Cattle Egret:** Seen most days.
5. **Little Egret:** Seen on the rice fields on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
6. **Great White Egret:** One seen at Arrocampo and at least one on the rice fields.
7. **Grey Heron:** Seen most days.
8. **White Stork:** Seen everyday.
9. **Grey Lag Goose:** Several thousand on rice fields on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
10. **Egyptian Goose:** One at Casas del Hito on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
11. **Wigeon:** Seen amongst rafts of duck on Sierra Brava reservoir on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
12. **Gadwall:** Seen on Sierra Brava reservoir, Moheda Alta and at Casas del Hito on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
13. **Teal:** Seen at Arrocampo and on Belén Plains.
14. **Pintail:** Probably at least one thousand present on pool at Casas del Hito on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
15. **Mallard:** Seen almost everyday.
16. **Shoveler:** Seen at Arrocampo and Sierra Brava.
17. **Red-crested Pochard:** A pair at Moheda Alta on 20<sup>th</sup> January
18. **Black-winged Kite:** One at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January and one at Casas del Hito on 20<sup>th</sup> January
19. **Red Kite:** Seen almost everyday, usually singly, but more sightings on plains on Belén and Santa Marta de Magasca.
20. **Griffon Vulture:** Seen everyday. Hundreds seen in Monfragüe National Park.
21. **Black Vulture:** Seen almost everyday, especially in Monfragüe National Park and on the plains.
22. **Marsh Harrier:** Seen at Arrocampo (about five birds) and on the rice fields.

23. **Hen Harrier:** A ring-tail seen near Santa Marta de Magasca and a male on the rice fields.
24. **Sparrowhawk:** One seen at Arrocampo and another in the Villuercas mountains.
25. **Common Buzzard:** Seen almost every day.
26. **Spanish Imperial Eagle:** Singles seen on each visit to Monfragüe National Park.
27. **Golden Eagle:** One juvenile seen from summit of Pico de Villuercas and two birds near Santa Marta de Magasca.
28. **Bonelli's Eagle:** A pair seen near Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January.
29. **Common Kestrel:** Seen almost every day.
30. **Merlin:** Seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January and on Belén plains on 21<sup>st</sup> January.
31. **Red-legged Partridge:** Seen almost every day.
32. **Water Rail:** Heard at Arrocampo.
33. **Moorhen:** Seen on several days.
34. **Purple Swamphen:** At least four seen at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January.
35. **Common Coot:** Present on larger bodies of water.
36. **Common Crane:** Three seen near Monroy on 19<sup>th</sup> January and several thousand on the rice fields on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
37. **Little Bustard:** About ten near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January and two groups totalling about 40 birds on Belén Plains on 21<sup>st</sup> January.
38. **Great Bustard:** About 35 seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 80 near Vegas Altas on 20<sup>th</sup> January and 27 on Belén Plains in 21<sup>st</sup> January.
39. **Avocet:** At least two near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
40. **Little Ringed Plover:** One near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
41. **Kentish Plover:** About twelve near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
42. **Golden Plover:** Present in large numbers (several hundreds) on plains and rice fields.

43. **Lapwing**: Seen everyday in large numbers.
44. **Dunlin**: Several hundred near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
45. **Ruff**: One at Moheda Alta on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
46. **Common Snipe**: About ten seen at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January and also on the rice fields.
47. **Common Curlew**: Five at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January.
48. **Spotted Redshank**: One near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
49. **Greenshank**: Several near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
50. **Green Sandpiper**: Seen almost every day.
51. **Common Sandpiper**: Singles seen at Arrocampo and at Moheda Alta.
52. **Lesser Black-backed Gull**: Seen almost daily.
53. **Black-headed Gull**: Seen almost daily.
54. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**: About eight seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January and four on Belén Plains on 21<sup>st</sup> January.
55. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**: At least 70 seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January.
56. **Feral Pigeon**: Seen almost daily.
57. **Wood Pigeon**: Seen almost daily.
58. **Collared Dove**: Seen almost daily.
59. **Eagle Owl**: Seen at Monfragüe on 19<sup>th</sup> January and also heard on 17<sup>th</sup> January.
60. **Little Owl**: Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca and also heard at Casa Rural El Recuerdo.
61. **Kingfisher**: Seen at Arrocampo and at least four on River Magasca on 19<sup>th</sup> January.
62. **Hoopoe**: Seen daily, with double figures seen some days.
63. **Calandra Lark**: Seen on the plains on 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> January.
64. **Crested Lark**: Seen almost daily.

65. **Thekla Lark:** Seen in Monfragüe and near Santa Marta de Magasca.
66. **Woodlark:** Heard near Santa Marta de Magasca.
67. **Skylark:** Large wintering flocks on plains and rice fields.
68. **Crag Martin:** Seen almost daily in suitable habitat.
69. **House Martin:** 30 or 40 present in Monfragüe on 17<sup>th</sup> January and a few also seen on Belén Plains on 21<sup>st</sup> January
70. **Meadow Pipit:** Seen almost daily.
71. **Grey Wagtail:** Seen on River Almonte south of Monroy.
72. **White Wagtail:** Seen almost daily.
73. **Wren:** Seen or heard almost daily.
74. **Robin:** Seen almost daily.
75. **Bluethroat:** One heard at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January and one seen well near Palazuelo on 20<sup>th</sup> January.
76. **Black Redstart:** Seen almost daily.
77. **Stonechat:** Seen almost daily.
78. **Blue Rock Thrush:** Seen in Monfragüe and in the Villuercas mountains.
79. **Blackbird:** Seen almost daily.
80. **Song Thrush:** Seen almost daily.
81. **Mistle Thrush:** Seen in the Villuercas mountains.
82. **Cetti's Warbler:** Heard at Arrocampo and on the rice fields.
83. **Zitting Cisticola:** Seen at Arrocampo, the rice fields and near Santa Marta de Magasca.
84. **Dartford Warbler:** One seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
85. **Sardinian Warbler:** Seen almost daily.
86. **Blackcap:** Seen almost daily.
87. **Common Chiffchaff:** Seen almost daily.

88. **Firecrest:** Seen in Monfragüe and the Villuercas mountains.
89. **Bearded Tit:** One at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January.
90. **Long-tailed Tit:** Seen almost daily.
91. **Blue Tit:** Seen almost daily.
92. **Great Tit:** Seen almost daily.
93. **Nuthatch:** Several seen in Villuercas mountains.
94. **Short-toed Treecreeper:** Seen in Villuercas mountains and Monfragüe.
95. **Penduline Tit:** Excellent views of a male at Arrocampo on 15<sup>th</sup> January.
96. **Southern Grey Shrike:** Seen every day.
97. **Jay:** Individuals seen most days.
98. **Azure-winged Magpie:** Parties seen every day.
99. **Magpie:** Seen every day.
100. **Jackdaw:** Seen almost daily.
101. **Raven:** Seen almost daily.
102. **Common Starling:** One seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
103. **Spotless Starling:** Seen daily.
104. **House Sparrow:** Seen daily.
105. **Spanish Sparrow:** Seen almost everyday.
106. **Tree Sparrow:** Seen on the rice fields.
107. **Rock Sparrow:** Over 200 seen at roost in Monfragüe on 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> January.
108. **Red Avadavat:** Large numbers on rice fields.
109. **Common Waxbill:** Brief views and heard on rice fields.
110. **Chaffinch:** Seen almost daily.
111. **Serin:** Seen on several days in small parties.

112. **Greenfinch:** Seen in small groups on several days, particularly on the plains, including a flock of over 50.
113. **Goldfinch:** Seen almost day and large flocks on plains.
114. **Siskin:** Seen almost every day.
115. **Linnet:** Seen almost daily.
116. **Hawfinch:** Seen in Monfragüe on 17<sup>th</sup> January.
117. **Rock Bunting:** A dead male found at Cabañas del Castillo.
118. **Reed Bunting:** Three seen on rice fields.
119. **Corn Bunting:** Seen almost every day and in large numbers.

**Mammals seen include:**

**Otter:** Monfragüe 17<sup>th</sup> January

**Red Deer:** Monfragüe 17<sup>th</sup> January