

Casa Rural El Recuerdo and Birding Extremadura

Holiday Report for Anne and Bob Turner

21st May to 28th May 2013

Itinerary

21st May 2013: Collection at Madrid Barajas airport and transfer to Casa Rural El Recuerdo, near Trujillo, Extremadura.

22nd May 2013: Plains and river valleys near the village of Santa Marta de Magasca

23rd May 2013: Woodlands near Cañamero, Guadalupe and Pico de Villuercas.

24th May 2013: Plains near Campo Lugar, rice fields near Madrigalejo and Sierra Brava reservoir.

25th May 2013: Gredos Mountains at Tornavacas Pass, Jerte valley and Honduras Pass.

26th May 2013: Guadiana River south of Mérida, Alange reservoir and Mérida city.

27th May 2013: Monfragüe National Park.

28th May 2013: Visit to Trujillo, followed by return to Madrid.

Holiday diary

The objective of the holiday was to explore the diversity of habitats and landscapes, including birds, flowers, butterflies and cultural history. We were fortunate to enjoy excellent weather throughout the week, and one of the most magnificent shows of wild flowers in living memory.

21st May 2013

Anne and Bob were met at Terminal 4 of Barajas airport in Madrid by Martin and his sister Katrina in the early evening and we took the ring road clockwise around the south of Madrid with the traffic starting to build up. However, by the time we had joined the A5 motorway heading south-west towards Extremadura, the traffic had eased and it was a smooth drive towards the setting sun. We stopped for a bite to eat about half way along the journey in a typical friendly Spanish bar. Although the light was fading, we were able to enjoy the sight of **Black Kites** patrolling the road, **White Storks** at their nests and the meadows a myriad of colours. We arrived mid-evening at Casa Rural El Recuerdo, welcomed by Claudia.

22nd May 2013

The area between Trujillo and Cáceres combines the open plains of traditional mixed farming, tracts of *dehesa* (wood pasture dominated by holm oaks) and deep steep-sided river valleys. We stopped at first on the edge of the plains, with the town of Trujillo to our east, magnificent on the summit of a granite batholith. Surrounding us was the sound of lark song: **Crested, Thekla** and **Calandra Larks**. An **Iberian Grey Shrike** perched on a fence post, whilst across the field, deep in wild flowers such as **Purple Vipers Bugloss**, strode in stately manner a fine male **Great Bustard**.

Looking closer at the meadows, we could see the yellows of marigolds and **Tolpis**, different shades of purples from thistles, as well as vetches and poppies. **Black Kites** patrolled the skies and we saw a graceful male **Montagu's Harrier** silently quartering the meadows.

Following coffee in the square of the little village of Santa Marta de Magasca, we visited first the Tamuja and then the Magasca valleys where **Crag Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows** hawked insects near the bridges, whilst Anne spotted a **Kingfisher** passing downstream like a blue dart.

In the afternoon we walked to the edge of an ancient drovers trail (a *Cañada Real*), thronged by larks and a mass of flowers and grasses. As we returned along the road, with **Spanish Sparrows** on the fences, we passed a derelict water mill with an old house opposite almost completely covered by **White Stork** nests, we then rose onto the granite batholith, where the gorgeous weathered rocky outcrops created a wonderful landscape.

23rd May 2013

Today we headed to the Villuercas mountains, lying in the east of Cáceres province and described as one of the finest examples of Appalachian relief in Europe. We spent the morning on the western slopes above the town of Cañamero. Here the higher altitude compared to the plains of yesterday, offered us a view back into earlier spring. The vegetation was lush, the **Gum Cistus** in full flower, as was the **French Lavender**. Shade was offered by the fresh leaves of the deciduous **Pyrenean Oak**, whilst **Nightingales** and **Green Woodpeckers** provided the song and calls to accompany us.

Following a visit to the famous church at Guadalupe and coffee in the pretty square, we took the small road which climbed to the highest point in the Villuercas range. The rough road took us initially through pine plantations, then groves of Sweet Chestnut and the Pyrenean Oak, with the latter becoming shorter in stature and with less developed buds the higher we climbed. We stopped for our picnic close to the medieval *Pozo de Nieve* (a deep stone-lined pit where snow was brought to provide a store of ice). The hillside was purple

with heaths in flower and we found a delightful clump of **Wild Tulips**, as well as masses of **Narrow-leaved Cistus** and **Star of Bethlehem**. A pair of **Red-billed Chough** was in residence in the ruin.

From the peak itself (at 1600 metres above sea-level) we could not only see the whole Villuercas range in splendour, but also well beyond to the Gredos Mountains and the Montes de Toledo. Here in the montane scrub sang **Dunnocks** and **Rock Buntings**.

24th May 2013

In contrast to yesterday, we returned today to the plains, this time to an area lying south of Casa Rural El Recuerdo, near the village of Campo Lugar. At our first stop we started seeing species typical of this traditional landscape: **Great and Little Bustards**, **Stone Curlew**, **Roller** and **Calandra Larks**. The endless hue of yellowing grasses was broken by the dramatic **Cardoon Thistles**, whilst with each step we took into the grass, countless grasshoppers were displaced. It was this food source that was attracting parties of **Ravens**, **Black Kites** and **White Storks**.

We descended from the dry plains to the nearby rice-growing area, where many of the fields were being flooded for sowing. Although most of the fields had little birdlife, some had attracted **Black-winged Stilts** and we also came across a party of **Ringed Plovers** and **Dunlin**. A stony field being used for a crop of maize was the venue for a colony of **Collared Pratincoles**. Nearby, where we had our picnic, was a slow-flowing river with gallery woodland of alder and poplar where **Nightingales**, **Cetti's Warblers** and **Great Reed Warblers** sang.

We drove through an area where two large thermo-solar plants have been established and then up, beside a canal to the Sierra Brava reservoir, which is one of the sources of water for the extensive rice-growing region. Although there was little on the large expanse of water, save **Great Crested Grebe**, we did have good views of **Black-eared Wheatear** on the rocky outcrops, and **Little Owl** and **Lesser Kestrel** on an abandoned barn.

25th May 2013

The northern boundary of Extremadura is marked by the high Gredos Mountains, part of the Sistema Central, a granite chain crossing the centre of the country. We drove from Trujillo, through the Monfragüe National Park to Plasencia and then up the Jerte valley. This deep valley is clothed by cherry orchards and mixed woodland, with high ridges above the tree-line with patches of snow which was still visible. We rose to the Tornavacas Pass, on the boundary between the provinces of Cáceres and Ávila. At the Pass we took a short walk on a path across a slope of yellow broom, its intense colour contrasting with the clear blue sky. The plaintive song of **Ortolan Buntings** accompanied us throughout the walk, whilst we also found a male **Red-backed Shrike** and a **Melodious Warbler**.

We then descended to the village of Tornavacas for coffee, and we sat at a terrace, watching a **Golden Oriole** fly across our view. Cherries were on sale from outlets by the roadside, and above us in the cloudless sky, a **Short-toed Eagle** held itself in fixed position, searching for reptiles coming to warm-up in the sunshine.

We drove up a narrow, twisting road, through mixed woodland and cherry orchards, finding a good place to picnic under shade of a fine oak. Whilst we had lunch a goatherd, barely looking his age of 17, arrived with his thirty or so animals. A few minutes later his father and brother arrived and it was a good opportunity to chat with them about their herd and their nearby small-holding where they were going to plant peppers.

We bade farewell to them and ascended further, reaching the Honduras Pass where again we could walk on a hillside surrounded by yellow broom and the song of **Ortolans**. The views across to the Alagón valley were stunning, as were at closer quarters the flowers in bloom at our feet.

26th May 2013

Today we headed south-west to meet the wide Guadiana River near Mérida, Extremadura's capital city. We walked in the riverine habitat of tamarisk and oleander, with **Nightingales** singing from almost every clump of bushes, with **Cuckoos** a-plenty too. The evidence of the high water levels in early spring was all too evident with flood debris stranded at more than head-height on the bushes beside the path. We then had coffee in the small town of Alange, before taking a walk beside the Alange reservoir. Its dam hosts the largest **Alpine Swift** colony in Extremadura, whilst the rocky outcrop close to the town, afforded us views of **Black Wheatear**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, **White-rumped Swift** and **Peregrine**, whilst **Gull-billed Terns** patrolled the shores of the reservoir.

Following lunch, we drove to Mérida, making a visit to the Roman Theatre and Amphitheatre, the Moorish fort and the adjacent Roman Bridge, the longest in the world and a superb spot also to watch **Common**, **Pallid** and **Alpine Swifts**, as well as egrets and **Kingfishers**.

27th May 2013

We had left until our final full day a visit to the Monfragüe National Park. This 18,000 hectare park lies north of Trujillo in an area of deeply folded quartzites and sandstones, intersected through by the two great rivers of Cáceres province: the Tajo and Tiétar. It was beside the latter where we made our first stop, where it enters the park from the north, cutting through the ridge to create a rocky gateway called the Portilla del Tiétar. Here we had magnificent views of **Spanish Imperial Eagle**, as well as **Egyptian Vulture**, nesting **Griffon Vultures**, **Rock Buntings** and two **White-rumped Swifts**. **Spanish Purple Hairstreak** butterflies were on the wing. Close-by is an attractive belt of cork oak *dehesa*, with a carpet of wild flowers, mainly yellow marigolds, Tolpis and white daisies.

We had a picnic lunch opposite the cliffs at the Tajadilla viewpoint where large **Griffon Vulture** nestlings waited to be fed and **Black Vultures** drifted overhead. A brood of **Ravens** sat in their nest on the rock face, whilst **Hawfinches** fed from old elm seeds.

We took an afternoon walk beside the Tajo River, where hundreds of **House Martins** were nesting below the road bridge and **Robins** sang in the moist shady woodland. Butterflies such as the **False Ilex Hairstreak**, **Nettle-tree Butterfly**, **Holly Blue** and **Speckled Wood** were also present along the path. Finally, we enjoyed the remainder of the afternoon at the viewpoint opposite the massive Peña Falcon rock, home for many pairs of **Griffon Vultures**. Two **Black Stork** nests were also in view, both with small white downy chicks. As we stood, wave after wave of **Griffon Vultures** were drifting in, passing above us, at eye-level and below and making well calculated descents, legs acting as air-brakes, to land with precision on their nesting ledges.

28 May 2013

The final morning dawned rather overcast and damp, but even the showers of rain did not deter us making a visit to the main square of Trujillo and taking a short walk through the medieval part of town. We took in the setting of the Main Square, with its palaces and grand church, as well as nests of **White Storks**, **Lesser Kestrels** and packs of **Common** and **Pallid Swifts**. After some shopping for local gastronomic products, we collected the luggage from Casa Rural El Recuerdo, bade farewells and then took the A5 motorway back to Madrid, safely reaching Barajas airport at 14.30 in good time for the check-in and return flight.