

Extremadura with Shetland Wildlife

26 April – 3 May 2014 Leaders: Judd Hunt and Martin Kelsey

Saturday 26 April

The group assembled at London Gatwick and arrived in Madrid following a pleasant flight. Here we were greeted by Martin, our co-guide for the week, before making our way west towards the region of Extremadura. En route, we were soon seeing birds typical of the region which included Black Kites, Griffon Vultures, Montague's Harrier and both Booted and Short-toed Eagle - with a flypast Hawfinch to boot! The weather that greeted us was cool, breezy with light rain but this was to be replaced by beautiful, warm conditions for the rest of our stay. Although a bit grim, this weather added to the dramatic views of the partly-shrouded Gredos Mountains which form the northern border of Extremadura.

After a few hours, we arrived in the small and charming village of Pago de San Clemente where Martin runs his beautiful Guest House, Casa Rural el Recuerdo along with his wife, Claudia. Located just a few kilometres from the medieval town of Trujillo, this was the perfect base for exploring the whole region and during our stay, Martin, Claudia and their son Patrick proved to be the most wonderful hosts.

We were soon scouring the garden while being serenaded by the enchanting song of a Common Nightingale who had taken-up residence there and, with perseverance, we had some great views of him. Red-rumped and Barn Swallows were twittering from the wires, Serins were jingling in song-flight above, a Sardinian Warbler was chattering away and a Hoopoe was "hoo, hoo, hooing" nearby. Spotless Starlings (slightly larger and blacker-looking than our counterparts) were whistling from their perches and a Red Kite drifted overhead heading to roost. What a wonderful introduction to the birdlife of the area!

After a delicious meal (a constant theme of the week!), we retired for the evening, anticipating a week full of exiting wildlife-watching ahead!

Sunday 27 April

A pre-breakfast walk failed to produce the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker that had been frequenting the neighbourhood but we did have great views of some Azure-winged Magpies. These dazzling corvids represent a relic population that exists only on the Iberian Peninsula with their nearest kin residing in Western China! Who knows what caused such a wide division to open up between these populations....

The grey, overcast weather from yesterday had been replaced by calm, warm and bright conditions and, following breakfast, we set off to explore the plains that lie between the towns of Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca.

The rolling countryside here is perfect for the species that dwell in steppe-like habitat and our first stop produced parties of beautiful Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse calling as they flew close overhead. Many Calandra Larks were watched as they delivered their buzzing songs, both in flight and from the ground. Thekla Larks were also noted and the group learned the subtle differences between these and their similar cousins, the Crested Lark which are also common across the region. Also here were 2 displaying male Little Bustards who repeatedly uttered their rather comical, raspberry-like calls and, while watching these a superb Montague's Harrier flew across our vista. We also spotted a migrant Ortolan Bunting here; possibly on his way from sub Saharan Africa to the breeding habitat in the Sierra de los Gredos or even further north.

A short drive revealed good views of a "bachelor party" of gigantic Great Bustards. Several birds were seen well in flight revealing their pied wing patterns and, considering their bulk, remarkably languid movement.

Although this area is described as arid, the recent rains had produced an explosion of plant-life and the grasses were tall and verdant with the flower meadows ablaze in a riot of colour. Taking advantage of this were a variety of butterflies and Brown Argus, Bath White, Small Heath and Scarce Swallowtail were noted.

At one roadside stop, we encountered several pairs of Montague's Harriers and were treated to some dazzling views of fly-past males as well as birds displaying high overhead. By the end of the day we saw at least 20 of these graceful but, sadly, endangered birds of prey.

As we continued to explore, we encountered an Ocellated Lizard, resplendent in green and yellow, as it ran across the road in front of the vehicles. Overhead, a juvenile Golden Eagle stopped us in our tracks and we watched in awe as a Red Kite repeatedly harried the bird away from its territory; the eagle appeared unflustered and drifted casually away! During the day we experienced 6 encounters with Golden Eagles, comprising at least 4 different birds and had superb views of several of these.

We also noted several Short-toed Larks, some delivering their song-flights and others, looking quite sparrow-like, playing hide-and-seek behind vegetation and in ploughed furrows. Although now a rare sight across most of Britain, Corn Buntings were everywhere and the group soon realised that this was the "default" species every time a passerine was spotted perching on a bush or on wires!

In the afternoon, after stopping to eat our packed lunches, we moved further west and soon spotted our first Bee-eaters. If the flower meadows were riotous in their colours then the Bee-eaters were almost kaleidoscopic by comparison! With their rich, fruity calls we were treated to views of them both perched and hunting their food of choice – bees! Nearly as gaudy are Rollers and we watched at least 8 of these blue and chestnut dazzlers at close quarters, some on telegraph wires and others undertaking their "rolling" display-flights near to the nest boxes that have been provided especially for them.

A prehistoric-looking Black Stork was seen flying in the distance while parties of Cattle Egrets and the commoner White Storks were seen in the company of the local livestock. In fact, White Storks were

everywhere and their nests adorned almost every ruined building or suitable tree, many with chicks visible over the tangle of twigs.

More Red Kites were seen as were some distant Lesser Kestrels but the sky here is dominated by vultures and today, with suitable weather, there were hundreds of them! Huge Griffons were by far the most common with over 200 noted but we also had super views of 10, even mightier, Black Vultures. We also enjoyed views of a single (relatively) diminutive, though more dapper, Egyptian Vulture.

To end the day, we stopped at the Bullring on the outskirts of Trujillo where we witnessed a colony of Lesser Kestrels hunting insects above us. We enjoyed incredible views as they brought food back to their nests, hidden between the tiles on the roof of the building and of birds displaying overhead whilst uttering their shrill calls.

Other birds of prey noted during the day included 2 Short-toed Eagles, a Marsh Harrier, at least 7 Booted Eagles, numerous Black Kites, Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels. Throw into the mix parties of Common and Pallid Swifts, Crag Martins, Cirl Bunting, Fan-tailed Warblers, a male Golden Oriole, great views of both Woodchat and Iberian (Southern) Grey Shrikes and flocks of Spanish Sparrows and I think you'll agree that this was a day to remember!

Monday 28 April

After breakfast we headed off into the famous and beautiful Monfrague National Park. Our first stop was opposite the cliff-face at Tietar where Eagle Owls breed annually. As we walked to the viewpoint, we spotted an Otter in the water below us and had good views whilst it gradually swam away from us.

While obtaining occasional and frustrating views of a well-grown owl chick, a splendid adult Spanish Imperial Eagle flew between us and the rock-face, affording incredible views! It was soon joined by a second bird and we also saw 4 Black Storks patrolling the rock-face where they breed. Also here we had super views of Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vultures as they drifted effortlessly overhead.

We drove a short distance and stopped for some splendid coffee, seeing a juvenile Ocellated Lizard just outside the building and followed this with a stroll through the surrounding “dehesa” woodland. We could hear 2 Western Orphean Warblers singing but, despite some effort, we couldn’t locate either as they sang from the dense canopy of the Cork Oaks. However, we did manage excellent views of a pair of Short-toed Treecreepers who had chosen an old hut as a nest-site. Although very similar to Eurasian Treecreepers, the song is quite different and the male frequently illustrated this. A Woodchat Shrike showed well but several Rock Sparrows proved more elusive with only a few people obtaining views.

We headed back through the National Park and stopped in the shade of some trees to have lunch. Here we saw good numbers of Black Kites drifting across the hillside plus we had superb views of a singing Western Subalpine Warbler.

Once replenished, we made our way to look for Bonelli’s Eagles at a traditional breeding site. Although we failed to locate the eagles, we were treated to great ‘scope views of Golden Orioles and a solitary Red Deer although a fly-past White-rumped Swift was seen only by Judd.

We then moved on to the next stop; the dramatic outcrop of rock known as Pena Falcon. Here we witnessed the constant toing and froing of many magnificent Griffon Vultures as they returned to their nests, crops laden with food for their young. Several Black Storks were seen, also tending their nests, while around us we had incredible views of Black Redstarts and Rock Buntings. Overhead, we spotted a Peregrine circling with the vultures; very apt considering the name of this site! The group were also treated to eye-level views of Crag Martins, Red-rumped Swallows and Serins plus one lucky person caught a fleeting glimpse of a Black Wheatear.

The day had flown by but eventually we had to return to base although while driving back we continued to see great birds; Hoopoes and Bee-eaters, Woodchat Shrikes and Crested Larks were all spotted from the vehicles. More raptors were noted including Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Red and Black Kites, Lesser Kestrels and Common Buzzards.

Once home, we enjoyed another delicious meal and followed this with a walk through the local countryside. As we departed the village, we heard the beautiful song of a Woodlark and enjoyed views of the bird as it circled its territory. Later, we heard both Red-necked Nightjar and Scop's Owl but neither revealed themselves although these songs, combined with the backdrop of crickets and the "sounds of the night", seemed to trigger the onset of drowsiness and we decided that, after another superb day, it was time to "hit the hay".

Tuesday 29 April

Today we headed south towards the areas of more intensive agriculture around the town of Madrigalejo. This is where the region's rice growing industry is centred and, as a change of habitat will frequently result in new species being encountered, we were all excited about what the day ahead would yield.

Along the way, we stopped on the plains at Campo Lugar and were soon enjoying wonderful views of Calandra Larks. They sang from nearby fence posts and above us in flight where they showed us their diagnostic sooty underwings with white trailing edges. A "bachelor" party of 17 Great Bustards were seen with several birds half-heartedly displaying. They seemingly turned themselves inside out making it difficult to discern which end is which although by now, with females sitting on nests, the effort was probably in vain!

In the distance we watched a Roller "rolling" through his display flight and then spotted a Great Spotted Cuckoo as it flew across a nearby field. Whilst listening to a Quail calling, we were treated to great views of 4 Gull-billed Terns as they flew low over the grassland, hawking insects. Our attention then turned to several Fan-tailed Warblers who were chasing each other over the tall grass next to the track before refocusing on groups of Lesser Kestrels that were hunting more distantly.

This was truly an awesome place but, with time moving on, we decided to drive the short distance to the reservoir at Sierra Brava. We immediately saw a Hoopoe right next to the vehicle and this was

followed shortly afterwards by amazing views of a stunning male Black-eared Wheatear. Further along, we noted several Great Crested Grebes on the reservoir plus a Melodious Warbler was playing “hard-to-get” in the roadside vegetation.

We headed on to the rice fields east of Madrigalejo. We stopped en route to watch a couple of beautiful Bee-eaters that were feeding and perching near their nesting burrows. Nearby, we found some partially flooded paddies and began to scour the area. Overhead, there were several Booted Eagles soaring although our attention soon turned to a splendid Squacco Heron that was sat in the open. A flyover Purple Heron was seen while all around us at least a dozen Gull-billed Terns were feeding. Out on the mud a plethora of migrant waders could be seen and a thorough search revealed a total of 15 species with the highlights being 5 Curlew Sandpipers (some of which were in full summer plumage), Spotted Redshank, Little Stints, Whimbrel, Black-winged Stilts, 2 Wood Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwit, a stunning summer plumage Grey Plover and several Ruff – wow!

A short distance away we stopped at the roadside to see what had grabbed the attention of a party of German birdwatchers and were soon watching a wonderful juvenile Black-shouldered Kite! After 10 minutes, the bird flew off and was briefly joined by its sibling allowing fantastic flight views of this most charming raptor. After all the excitement, we decided a coffee stop was the order of the day and, following this, we headed off further east to Puerto Peña where we took lunch.

Before we could begin to fully enjoy our delicious picnic, a Bonelli’s Eagle appeared overhead and we enjoyed fabulous views of this handsome raptor. A second bird was also seen plus we were treated to a wonderful sight as up to 7 Black Storks circled and displayed to each other. Lunch was constantly being interrupted (although nobody was complaining!) as more great birds put in an appearance; Alpine Swifts, Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows were zipping around the crags, Griffons Vultures were seen flying past at eye-level, Short-toed Eagles were overhead, 2 Red-billed Choughs were seen wheeling across the hillside and the song of Golden Orioles could be heard in the valley below. This lunch stop trumped all others – a truly wonderful place!

Eventually, we dragged ourselves away (having finally managed to consume our lunch!) and set off back towards Madrigalejo. Soon after, we were parked up and enjoying stunning views of Collared Pratincoles as they hawked insects overhead. We also found a few birds sat in a nearby ploughed field and we enjoyed great views of this beautiful, graceful species. We spent time walking through some riverine habitat and the raucous song of Great Reed Warblers could be heard. Cetti's Warblers delivered their explosive songs from the thickets and several Tree Sparrows and an elusive Melodious Warbler were seen.

As we walked alongside a ditch choked with reed and low vegetation we heard and saw both Red Avadavats and Common Waxbill. These birds, like our populations of Ring-necked Parakeet, have established viable populations from escaping caged birds and in the case of the Avadavats, added a flavour of the Indian Subcontinent to rural Spain! In this area we also enjoyed views of Rollers, Bee-eaters and Hoopoes which created a sub-tropical atmosphere to the proceedings!

Again, it was time to head home where we had time to relax and thoroughly enjoy our evening meal.

Wednesday 30 April

We set off after breakfast and headed back into Monfrague National Park and to the Eagle Owl site at Tietar. Before we arrived at the site we saw several Black-eared Wheatears along the roadside and a few Alpine Swifts whizzed past while we crossed a high bridge.

On this occasion the owls were more compliant and 2 well-grown chicks were "scoped" while they moved around the nest-site. Despite a thorough search for the adults, we failed to locate them but the youngsters more than made up for this with their antics as they played hide-and-seek behind the boulders!

Before heading off to our destination in the Sierra de los Gredos, we stopped for coffee on the outskirts of the park and had fleeting views of Rock Sparrows and heard the distant song of Orphean Warblers.

En route, we saw Golden Orioles, Black Redstarts and Bee-eaters and in no time we began the ascent into the mountains. The landscape and habitat began to change significantly and we were soon amidst pristine Pyrenean Oak woodland alongside steep-sided valleys. A stop here produced several Bonelli's Warblers uttering their vibrant, trilling songs which herald springtime at this altitude in the same way Wood Warblers do "back home". Several Great Spotted Woodpeckers were seen and heard but then, close by, a feebler drumming could be heard and we were soon watching a beautiful female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which is, unfortunately, such a rare sight in the UK these days.

Moving onwards and upwards we eventually cleared the treeline and took our lunch in this area. Here we watched a close Subalpine Warbler, who occasionally burst into song, a Common Whitethroat which also staked his territory nearby and more Bonelli's Warblers singing from isolated stands of budding trees. Overhead, we watched large groups of Pallid Swifts, screaming as they headed over the mountain-pass towards their colonies in the valleys below. After finishing our lunch, we walked the short distance to a cluster of pine trees and enjoyed superb views of Rock Bunting, Woodlark, more Bonelli's Warblers and a few Coal Tits (which are a localised, montane species in this region). Several Firecrests could be heard singing and we eventually obtained wonderful views of this beautiful sprite.

We continued driving higher into the Gredos and eventually arrived in a large, scrub-filled valley surrounded by the high, snow-clad mountains. We were literally on the border of the regions of Extremadura and Castille y Leon and the temperature at this altitude was noticeably cooler. After a short walk, we discovered a gorgeous pair of Ortolan Buntings – a species so typical of this habitat in central Spain and we spent some time admiring them as they fed next to stand of Broom. Occasional bursts of their enchanting song, combined with that of distant, invisible Skylarks created a wonderful ambience that seemed to fit so well in this tranquil environment.

It was soon time to depart so we said farewell to the mountains and took a leisurely drive back to the lowlands, eventually returning home where we were greeted with another sumptuous dinner.

Before retiring for the night, we took a stroll in the lanes above the village and were rewarded with stunning views of a pair of Red-necked Nightjars as they patrolled their territory and hunted moths a few feet above us. Their occasional “Choc-a-choc” song cut through the still evening air, mingling with the distant calls of a Scop’s Owl and the song of a nearby Woodlark. With the remnants of daylight fast disappearing behind the Sierra de los Lagares, the tranquillity of the world around us lured us back home and induced a restful night’s sleep.

Thursday 1 May

Following breakfast, the group set off and headed towards the south of Extremadura in search of new species.

Our first stop was in the area known as Tierra de Barros and our quarry were Rufous-tailed Bush Robins. This late migrant occurs in the intensively farmed fields, scattered with Olive Trees, that are found here but, unfortunately, it was evident that they hadn’t yet arrived back from their wintering grounds in Africa. However, we did enjoy excellent views of Crested Larks, Red-legged Partridge and 2 male Black-eared Wheatears here.

En route to our next destination, we stopped near some wetlands and saw a small group of Greater Flamingos resting in the pools while overhead we watched a group of gorgeous Collared Pratincoles hunting insects. The fields surrounding us held singing Calandra and Short-toed Larks and, while enjoying these, a splendid Montague’s Harrier flew past.

Lunchtime saw us parked above the dam at Alange Reservoir and we ate our meals under the shade of the trees while watching huge carp patrolling in the waters below.

However, it was the Alpine Swifts that stole the show as hundreds of these magnificent aerial acrobats shrieked and twittered all around us. It was amazing to watch these huge swifts as they flew at incredible speed in follow-the-leader fashion! Below us we spotted a Purple Heron in a reedy channel and out on the reservoir Gull-billed Terns could be seen fishing.

Once replenished, we took a walk around the fringes of the reservoir and kept an eye on the rocky outcrops on our left. It wasn't long before we encountered our target species and everyone enjoyed fantastic views of a pair of Black Wheatears. The sooty-black male regularly sallied into the sky to deliver his song-flight, tailed fanned wide which accentuated the contrasting black and white pattern while the dark, chocolate-brown female could be seen as she tirelessly brought food to the nest hole. In the water below us we watched a Viperine Snake as it swam across the surface, flushing fish fry as it went. Another male Black Wheatear was seen more distantly as we watched a constant procession of Griffon Vultures and Black Kites passing the cliff-face.

Our next stop saw us exploring the riverine habitat adjacent to the Rio Guadiana. Here we saw and heard several Golden Orioles which completed the "Colourful Quintet" for the day having previously seen Bee-eater, Roller, Hoopoe and Kingfisher! Tree Sparrows were common and we also had super views of a Great Reed Warbler as he sang raucously from a nearby reed bed.

Our last destination before returning home was a visit the capital of Extremadura; Merida. We made our way onto the ancient Roman bridge which, now free of vehicles, was a great place to watch the local wildlife. We watched an almost constant procession of Purple Herons, plus Cattle and Little Egrets as they used the river to navigate from breeding to feeding grounds. Both Great Reed and Common Reed Warblers were seen, the former looking colossal when compared to its diminutive cousin and 2 Night Herons flew from the cover of their daytime roost. Pallid and Common Swifts were closely observed allowing the group to learn the subtle differences of plumage and wing-shape that separate the species. However, the limelight was stolen by a stunning male Penduline Tit! Everyone marvelled as he intricately added weave after weave to the incredible suspended, domed nest that he was building.

After dinner we walked through the lanes above the village and were, once more, treated to wonderful views of the Red-necked Nightjars although a calling Stone Curlew could not be located.

Friday 2 May

The morning of our final full day saw us heading eastwards to the area of heathland near the town of Jaraicejo.

As we arrived we were greeted by the songs of Thekla Larks and Corn Buntings with several birds well-watched from their perches atop bushes and overhead wires. Splendid views of Dartford Warblers were obtained as they, too, sang from the tops of nearby bushes. The males could be seen darting from bush to bush, their tails juddering, before alighting and showing off the vinaceous-coloured underparts and leaden-grey upperparts.

We walked a short distance before hearing the rich, fruity song (“like a full-bodied Rioja on a summer evening”) of a Western Orphean Warbler and we soon located him singing in the canopy of an oak tree. This large warbler, like a “Lesser Whitethroat on steroids” with a pale iris performed well and everyone had super views. At this spot we were also treated to great views of a Subalpine Warbler plus a pair of Woodchat Shrikes while overhead, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Black Kites and a Black Stork were also seen.

Another short walk revealed a Northern Wheatear, a migrant bird bound for higher altitudes or latitudes, and then, just off the main track, we located 2 male Spectacled Warblers. Both were singing avidly, proclaiming their territories and giving great views as they perched on the highest twigs available. What a place to see “Sylvia” warblers with some of Europe’s most sought-after species all showing so well in such a small area!

From here we drove to the marshlands that surround the reservoir of Arrocampo and, upon arrival, saw the first Sand Martins of the trip. Hirundines are common in this region with many Barn Swallows, Red-rumped Swallows, House Martins and Crag Martins being seen daily but Sand Martins are much more localised.

As we approached the fringes of a large reed bed we heard the monotonous, insect-like churring of a Savi’s Warbler. We eventually spotted him and had good views while he clung to the tallest reed stems.

Both Reed and Great Reed Warblers could be heard signing and Purple Swampheens were watched as they clambered about low in the reeds. Brief views of a Squacco Heron were followed by a dapper-looking male Little Bittern which showed well before flying off across the reeds and several Purple Herons were seen more distantly.

We moved to another location for lunch and enjoyed watching Purple Herons, the continental race of Great Cormorant, Gull-billed Terns, Common Sandpiper and Redshank. Keeping a close eye on us was an inquisitive White Stork although it couldn't be tempted nearer even when offered a piece of delicious tuna baguette!

Later we drove a short distance and soon spotted a splendid juvenile Black-shouldered Kite sitting in a nearby tree. We had excellent views of this gorgeous bird of prey before it flew off and disappeared from view. We then spotted 2 stunning Great Spotted Cuckoos and, although they gave us a bit of a run-around, everyone managed to get great views of these Magpie-nest parasites.

Our next stop brought us to a beautiful, serene location overlooking a grass-fringed pool which mirrored the reflection of the distant Gredos Mountains. Here we saw 6 Great White Egrets, a localised species Extremadura and watched a Common Cuckoo as he called from the treetops. A Woodchat Shrike was none too happy about this and began to chase the cuckoo from its territory, even plucking a feather out of his back for good measure! He was one feisty little chap!

Before returning to our lodgings we had one last visit to the Bullring in Trujillo. The late afternoon sunlight cast a mellow glow on the building with the earthen-rich tiles casting an orangey hue on the underside of the alighting Lesser Kestrels.

Although the day continued to produce an eclectic mix of species, it was time to head home and enjoy our final dinner before, sadly, having to pack our cases in readiness for tomorrow's departure.

Saturday 3 May

Following breakfast and saying a warm thank you and farewell to Claudia and Patrick, we began our leisurely journey back to Madrid. Along the way we had time to stop and spend a little more time searching for birds. Along a ridge, which overlooked Arrocampo, we found a pair of gorgeous Crested Tits and spent time watching them as they fed and called constantly amongst the pine trees.

Once in Madrid Airport, we checked-in, dropped off our baggage and said our fond farewells to Martin. After a week in his engaging company we had all learned a huge amount about the wildlife, history and culture of this most wonderful and unspoilt region of Spain; it was with heavy hearts that we said our goodbyes.

The short wait in the airport gave us all time to reflect on just how memorable this trip had been; super hosts, beautiful accommodation, wonderful food, lovely weather and, the main reason we were all bound together, absolutely stunning wildlife!

After another trouble-free flight we arrived on time in Gatwick. This heralded more farewells and best wishes but holding high hopes that we would all see each other again - hopefully sometime soon!

