

Birding Extremadura and Casa Rural El Recuerdo

REPORT ON WINTER HOLIDAY FOR NIGEL, MURIEL, JOHN AND BRENDA

Itinerary (28th January – 3rd February 2014)

28th January 2014: Transfer from Madrid Airport to Casa Rural El Recuerdo

29th January 2014: Ricefields south of Madrigalejo, Moheda
Alta and Sierra Brava reservoir

30th January 2014: Monfragüe National Park

31st January 2014: Exploring the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta
de Magasca and the plains north of Cáceres

1st February 2014: Palazuelo and Montánchez

2nd February 2014: Arrocampo reservoir and Charca Salado

3rd February 2014: Valdecañas valley and return to Madrid.



Trip Report (including photos by Nigel)

Day 1: 28th January 2014: Transfer from Madrid Airport to Casa Rural El Recuerdo

Nigel, Muriel, John and Brenda arrived in excellent time and by 16.30, as hoped, we were loading up the luggage in the minibus to start our journey from Madrid airport to Extremadura. It was a damp and cloudy afternoon and the light steadily dimmed as we approached our destination. En route prior to a stop for

coffee, we saw a large group of about 200 **White Stork** resting in a pasture, presumably a migrating flock. Wintering **Red Kites** were much in evidence throughout the 250 kilometre drive and as we entered Extremadura so we saw our first **Common Cranes**, with small parties rising from the *dehesa* woodland and flying to roost. We reached Casa Rural El Recuerdo at about 20.00, where a fine log-fire in the grate and dinner greeted us.

Day 2: 29th January 2014: Rice fields south of Madrigalejo, Moheda Alta and Sierra Brava reservoir

It was a cool and windy day, which remained dry with periods of sunshine, but chilly because of the fresh north-westerlies.

We explored the area from Madrigalejo southwards in the morning, after an initial stop at the disused railway station where we failed to find any roosting Stone Curlew. However, from that moment onwards the trumpeting sounds of **Common Cranes** were a constant backdrop. Whilst we stood a pair of **House Martins** flew around. We spent most of the morning in the arable lands near the village of Vegas Altas, where there is a mosaic of crops: rice and maize stubble fields, muddy ploughed fields, winter wheat, tomato fields and olive orchards. Despite the intensive landuse, the area is magnificent for birds in winter. At our very first stop we enjoyed prolonged views of a **Bluethroat**, whilst just metres further on, there were large flocks of **Common Crane** and party of about 40 **Great Bustard**. We criss-crossed the area, seeing vast numbers of **Common Cranes** and finding a wintering flock of about 70 **Stone Curlew**, which was quite a spectacle as they rose from the rows of young olives.

After a stop for coffee, we dropped in to visit the Crane Information Centre at Moheda Alta. A **Little Owl** was calling from the old holm trees and family groups of **Common Cranes** were feeding under the trees. In the distance, a **Black-winged Kite** was spotted hovering. We went up to a tower hide overlooking a feeding area for cranes and we not disappointed by the numbers there. From the hide, we also watched a juvenile **Bonelli's Eagle** being mobbed by a pair of **Common Buzzard**. **Iberian Grey Shrikes** perched on the fence in front of us.

We stayed in the area for our picnic lunch, watching **Long-tailed Tits**, **Blackcaps** and **Common Chiffchaffs** feeding in the trees, before returning to the area near Vegas Altas. We enjoyed the spectacle of dozens of **Cattle Egrets** and **White Stork** following the plough and found another group of about 30 **Great Bustard**. The wet fields were productive for **Common Snipe** and **Green Sandpiper**, as well as many **White Wagtail**, **Meadow Pipits** and a single **Water Pipit**. An obliging **Zitting Cisticola** sat on the fence near the vehicle long enough for Nigel to photograph (see top of next page).



We then headed north of Madrigalejo, taking a track through Casas del Hito, where we had excellent views of a **Black-winged Kite** and saw an absolutely massive feeding flock of **Common Crane** on a maize stubble field (see below).



Nearby there were small parties of **Grey Lag Geese**. Ending the day near the Sierra Brava reservoir, on the concrete back of the canal, a **Kingfisher** sat in lovely afternoon sunshine, oblivious of our close presence. To crown it all, it rose and hovered for what seemed like minutes right beside us. The reservoir itself was difficult to watch over because of the windy conditions, making the rafts of resting duck hard to survey. However there was large numbers of **Shoveler**, as well as **Gadwall, Mallard, Coot** and **Great Crested Grebe** visible. Light was fading as we made our return to Casa Rural El Recuerdo.

Day 3: 30th January 2014: Monfragüe National Park

The day started clear, calm and sunny and although the wind picked-up a little during the day and there was some afternoon cloud, it remained fine the whole time. Indeed, a perfect day for birds of prey in Monfragüe National Park!

We stopped first at the magnificent viewpoint of Peña Falcón, just as squadrons of **Griffon Vultures** were lifting themselves off the huge cliff. A few **Black Vultures** drifted across the view. We located a **Peregrine Falcon** perched at the very highest point of all and as we watched, it took off and dramatically stooped in a perfect straight line all the way to the surface of the River Tajo. Its target dived and the **Peregrine** veered and then down again. We did not have time to confirm the identity of its prey (probably a Little Grebe), because with this second attempt it was successful, carrying the victim off. Interestingly as it approached the prey the second time, another Peregrine also appeared, low over the water surface. Other birds also attracted our attention, such as fine male **Blue Rock Thrush**, whilst far away across the water, an **Eagle Owl** was hooting.

After coffee in the hamlet of Villareal de San Carlos, we headed straight to the Portilla del Tiétar viewpoint. As soon as we stopped we found a **Spanish Imperial Eagle**, perched on a high crag. It remained there for several minutes before flying off eastwards. Later it was to reappear, with its mate and treated us to a fine courtship display, both sky-dancing. **Griffon Vultures** as well as **Black Vultures** (see next page) were evident throughout our stay, the former bringing in nesting material.



We returned to a belt of pines for lunch, where we had seen three **Red Deer** as we earlier. **Azure-winged Magpies** were quickly attracted by our presence and came down to feed on pieces of cheese. There were **Hawfinches** calling, but they proved very difficult to see and a **Cirl Bunting** sang nearby. However, we did see **House Martins** and **Crag Martins** feeding above us. After lunch we made a couple more stops, including at the Puente del Cardenal viewpoint. Here we got brief views of **Hawfinch**, as well as **Blackcap** and **Sardinian Warbler**, but best of all was a displaying pair of **Bonelli's Eagles**.

We ended the day back at Peña Falcón, where we met up with Neil Renwick. There were hundreds of **Griffon Vultures** on their way back to the roosting cliffs and we also found an adult **Egyptian Vulture** arriving as well. Throughout our stay there, the sound of **Eagle Owl** resonated across the gorge, a magnificently evocative way to end the day.

Day 4: 31st January 2014: Exploring the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca and the plains north of Cáceres

Again another fine day with light winds and cloudy periods, and we opted to spend it on the plains to the west and north of Trujillo.

We started east of Santa Marta de Magasca. The day started dull, so it was quite hard to find the cleverly camouflaged **Little Bustards** standing in tall dead

vegetation, but patience paid off. From the same spot, we could watch singing **Corn Buntings**, an **Iberian Grey Shrike**, as well as **Crested Larks**. Nearby, distant **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** were watched in flight, but we had superbly close views of several **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** passing by, including one individual which had a curious display flight, calling from a great height as it glided on still wings, or made weak, shallow wingbeats. **Calandra Larks** were also very vocal, in the sky as well as from rocky outcrops as were **Thekla Larks**. No fewer than three **Little Owls** were also in view at the same time, in close proximity. We almost overlooked a group of about 30 **Great Bustards**, quietly standing on a low ridge close-by. As we drove from this area, a **Merlin** swiftly flew low over the rough pasture.

After coffee at the village, we headed across the plains to the Talaván reservoir. Here we had a short walk beside the water, seeing **Reed Bunting** and **Zitting Cisticola**. **Mallard** and **Teal** were the only duck present, but there were large numbers of **Great Cormorants**. Whilst we were having lunch, Nigel spotted on a very distant pylon a dark shape. It revealed itself as a **Golden Eagle** and we enjoyed the sight of it taking off and approaching us. For the next half an hour we watching the **Golden Eagle** pair together, including in copulation. As one of the birds flew off, back to the same pylon, it crossed the same field of view as a **Black-winged Kite**, perched not far away from us.

After lunch we headed north to the plains near Hinojal. Here we stopped to admire a close quarters a group of **Griffon** and **Black Vultures**, which had been feeding on a carcass of a sheep. In the same area, we quickly found what we can come there for: a party of six wintering **Dotterel** very busily foraging on the bare, stony ground.

Passing by Talaván again, we saw the **Black-winged Kite**. We then drove back to Trujillo, again across the plains, stopping for a glorious view of a party of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** on the ground in the full glory of afternoon sunshine (see below).



Day 5: 1st February 2014: Palazuelo, Montánchez and the Belén Plains

The wind was stronger today and it was overcast for most of the time, although brightening up during the afternoon. We spent the morning on the rice fields near the village of Palazuelo. Here the **Common Cranes** were more dispersed, often just in family groups. We stopped at the Ruercas River where **Cetti's Warblers** sang and a **Penduline Tit** was seen very briefly. Our main quarry today was waders and eventually we found groups, to the west of the village. There were good numbers of **Black-winged Stilts** and **Common Snipe** and particularly pleasing were the parties of **Kentish Plover**, **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin** and **Little Stint**.

After coffee, we drove west, passing more rice-growing areas, before heading north to the Sierra of Montánchez. We found a vantage point with an impressive view to the north, on a hillside with deciduous oak for our picnic. **Chaffinches** and **Sardinian Warblers** were present, but it was in pursuit of a **Short-toed Treecreeper**, that we came across the gem of a very obliging male Lesser **Spotted Woodpecker**.

After lunch we drove through the narrow streets of the pretty town of Montánchez. Parking beside the castle, we took the steep road around the side of the edifice, taking in the spectacular views across the centre of Extremadura. There were **Blue Rock Thrushes** on the slopes below us. On the southern side of the castle, we found two **Alpine Accentors**, one of which proved delightfully obliging as it fed not far from our feet (see below).



We crossed *dehesa* woodland and then plains on our way back to Trujillo and filled the remainder of the afternoon with a visit to the Belén Plains. Here the highlight was a wonderful view of a pair of **Little Owl** (see below). Back at Casa Rural El Recuerdo, we were joined by Neil for dinner.



Day 6: 2nd February 2014: Arrocampo reservoir and Charca Salado

It was an absolutely perfect day for our destination today – the reed beds of Arrocampo. We had clear skies, sunshine and hardly any wind.

As we approached we saw a **Black-winged Kite** on a telegraph post and shortly after our arrival, another was hovering close to our path. Three **Barn Swallows** flew overhead, whilst Purple **Swamphens** trumpeted from the *Typha* in front of us. Weaker calls were also heard: **Penduline Tits**, and we quite quickly tracked down three feeding on the *Typha* seed heads. **White Storks** were bill-clacking from their nests, whilst to the west a large party was rising on a thermal, probably a migrating flock. From the ramp of a hide, we could check an area of exposed mud and we rewarded by good views of a **Bluethroat**.

After coffee, we drove to the west of the reservoir, checking backwaters and small pools. Here we found **Grey Wagtail** and a group of **Gadwall**. We then

headed further west to a small dam surrounded by *dehesa*. This is Charca Salado and it was one of the most beautiful spots of the whole week. The water was still and reflected the green of the *dehesa* woodland, whilst in the background stood the impressive Gredos Mountains, with a respectable covering of snow, resplendent against the cloudless sky. On the shoreline were several **Great White Egrets** and **Little Egrets**, a party of **Spoonbill**, **Grey Heron** and a large number of resting **White Stork** and **Great Cormorant**. **Teal** swam in small groups. Dozens of **White Wagtails** gracefully were catching flies from the surface of the water, acrobatically manoeuvring over the middle of the water. **Black-headed Gulls** were doing the same, and we found an adult **Yellow-legged Gull** flying close to a **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, making a good comparison.

We found a picnic spot affording a good view across this picturesque place, one of the highlights of the week.

We returned to Arrocampo via Casatejada, seeing another pair of **Black-winged Kites**, and spent a considerable time at our first spot, hoping for a glimpse of **Little Bittern**. Muriel and Brenda were lucky enough to get a short sighting. We decided to try another area and luckily this time we all got a couple of flight views of a fine male **Little Bittern**, at quite close quarters. We were hoping for a third view when a fisherman came wading through the reeds, but remarkably the **Little Bittern** stayed put.

Day 7: 3rd February 2014: Valdecañas valley and return to Madrid.

The weather had changed overnight to wind and rain. We packed the minibus and set off back to Madrid, stopping up a small valley close to the Valdecañas dam for a final hour or so of birding. Despite the weather we got better views of **Hawfinch** than we had had all week and **Jays** were a new bird for the trip. **Griffon Vultures** and a **Peregrine** were seen beside an impressive crag. From there we rejoined the motorway for Madrid, with a stop for coffee half way. **White Storks**, **Common Cranes**, **Common Buzzard**, **Red Kite** and a **Sparrowhawk** were birds of note on the journey. We arrived in good time at 14.00 in Madrid. Snow had fallen that morning in the city (bit had not settled), and indeed it certainly felt chilly as we entered the airport terminal for check-in.

Annotated List of Birds Seen

Despite rather windy weather which limited possibilities for viewing waterfowl on Sierra Brava reservoir, we nevertheless recorded a very satisfactory total of 122 species over six and a half days in the field.

1. **Little Grebe** Seen at Monfragüe (as Peregrine's prey), at Talaván and Arrocampo.

2. **Great Crested Grebe** Seen at Arrocampo, Sierra Brava and Talaván reservoirs, as well as Monfragüe.
3. **Great Cormorant** Seen at Arrocampo, Monfragüe and Talaván.
4. **Little Bittern** A male and a female at Arrocampo on 2nd Feb.
5. **Cattle Egret** Seen most days, including large numbers following the plough in the rice fields.
6. **Little Egret** Seen most days.
7. **Great Egret** Singles seen at Moheda Alta and Talaván, but about 15 at Charca Salado.
8. **Grey Heron** Seen every day.
9. **White Stork** Seen every day, including large numbers of migrating birds.
10. **Spoonbill** Five at Charca Salado on 2nd Feb.
11. **Grey Lag Goose** Small numbers (double-figures) on rice fields on 29th January.
12. **Gadwall** Seen at Sierra Brava and Talaván reservoirs.
13. **Teal** Seen at Talaván and Charca Salado.
14. **Mallard** Seen almost every day.
15. **Shoveler** Thousands at Sierra Brava and one male at Charca Salado.
16. **Black-winged Kite** Lots of sightings: one at Moheda Alta and one near Madrigalejo on 29th January, one or two individuals seen at Talaván on 31st January, two pairs seen at Arrocampo on 2nd February.
17. **Red Kite** Seen every day.
18. **Egyptian Vulture** An adult at Monfragüe on 30th January.
19. **Griffon Vulture** Seen almost every day.
20. **Black Vulture** Seen almost every day.
21. **Marsh Harrier** Seen almost every day, especially on rice fields and at Arrocampo.
22. **Hen Harrier** A male near Sierra Brava on 29th January.
23. **Sparrowhawk** Seen almost everyday.

24. **Common Buzzard** Seen every day.
25. **Spanish Imperial Eagle** A pair in Monfragüe National Park on 30th January.
26. **Golden Eagle** A pair at Talaván reservoir on 31st January.
27. **Bonelli's Eagle** A juvenile at Moheda Alta on 29th January and a pair in Monfragüe on 30th January.
28. **Common Kestrel** Seen almost every day.
29. **Merlin** Two seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
30. **Peregrine Falcon** A pair seen in Monfragüe and one near Valdecañas.
31. **Red-legged Partridge** Seen or heard almost daily.
32. **Water Rail** Heard at Talaván and Arrocampo.
33. **Moorhen** Seen on several days.
34. **Purple Swamphen** Several at Arrocampo.
35. **Common Coot** Seen on several days.
36. **Common Crane** Seen daily, with many thousands on rice fields near Madrigalejo on 29th January
37. **Little Bustard** Five seen near Santa Marta de Magasca on 31st Jan.
38. **Great Bustard** A total of 60-70 seen on 29th January south of Madrigalejo and about 40 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 31st January.
39. **Black-winged Stilt** Seen on rice fields near Palazuelo.
40. **Stone Curlew** 60-70 at roost near Madrigalejo on 29th January.
41. **Ringed Plover** About 20 near Palazuelo on 1st February
42. **Little Ringed Plover** One near Palazuelo on 1st February.
43. **Kentish Plover** About 25 near Palazuelo on 1st February.
44. **Golden Plover** Seen on rice fields.
45. **Dotterel** Six near Hinojal on 31st January.
46. **Lapwing** Seen every day.

47. **Dunlin** About 300 near Palazuelo on 1st February.
48. **Little Stint** About 20 near Palazuelo on 1st February.
49. **Common Snipe** Seen on rice fields and at Arrocampo.
50. **Greenshank** Two or three near Palazuelo and one at Charca Salado.
51. **Green Sandpiper** Seen almost daily
52. **Common Sandpiper** One at Charca Salado on 2nd February.
53. **Black-headed Gull** Seen on several days, especially on the rice fields.
54. **Lesser Black-backed Gull** Seen almost daily.
55. **Yellow-legged Gull** One at Charca Salado on 2nd February.
56. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** Seen near Madriaglejo and near Santa Marta de Magasca.
57. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
58. **Feral Pigeon** Seen daily.
59. **Wood Pigeon** Seen almost daily.
60. **Collared Dove** Seen on most days.
61. **Barn Owl** One at Pago de San Clemente on 2nd February.
62. **Eagle Owl** Heard calling at Monfragüe.
63. **Little Owl** Seen or heard daily.
64. **Kingfisher** Seen almost daily.
65. **Hoopoe** Seen daily.
66. **Great Spotted Woodpecker** Heard at Monfragüe.
67. **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** Seen at Montánchez on 1st February, also heard drumming at Pago de San Clemente on 2nd.
68. **Calandra Lark** Seen almost daily
69. **Crested Lark** Seen almost daily.

70. **Thekla Lark** Seen near Santa Marta de Magasca.
71. **Woodlark** Heard near Santa Marta de Magasca.
72. **Skylark** Seen on plains and rice fields.
73. **Crag Martin** Seen almost daily.
74. **Barn Swallow** Seen at Arrocampo on 2nd February.
75. **House Martin** Seen at Madrigalejo on 29th January, at Monfragüe and at Arrocampo.
76. **Meadow Pipit** Seen almost daily.
77. **Water Pipit** One seen on rice fields on 29th January.
78. **Grey Wagtail** Seen at Arrocampo and on return to Madrid.
79. **White Wagtail** Seen daily in large numbers.
80. **Wren** Seen or heard almost daily.
81. **Alpine Accentor** Two at Montánchez on 1st February.
82. **Robin** Seen daily.
83. **Bluethroat** Seen near Madrigalejo on 29th January and at Arrocampo on 2nd February.
84. **Black Redstart** Seen daily.
85. **Stonechat** Seen daily.
86. **Blue Rock Thrush** Seen in Monfragüe and Montánchez.
87. **Blackbird** Seen daily.
88. **Song Thrush** Seen daily
89. **Mistle Thrush** Seen almost daily.
90. **Cetti's Warbler** Recorded on several days.
91. **Zitting Cisticola** Seen almost daily.
92. **Sardinian Warbler** Seen on several days.
93. **Blackcap** Seen daily.

94. **Common Chiffchaff** Seen daily.
95. **Long-tailed Tit** Recorded almost daily.
96. **Blue Tit** Seen daily.
97. **Great Tit** Seen daily.
98. **Short-toed Treecreeper** Recorded almost daily.
99. **Penduline Tit** Three at Arrocampo on 2nd February.
100. **Iberian Grey Shrike** Seen almost daily.
101. **Jay** Recorded at Valdecañas
102. **Azure-winged Magpie** Seen daily.
103. **Magpie** Seen daily.
104. **Jackdaw** Seen on several days.
105. **Raven** Seen almost daily.
106. **Common Starling** Seen on plains.
107. **Spotless Starling** Seen daily.
108. **House Sparrow** Seen daily.
109. **Spanish Sparrow** Seen almost daily.
110. **Tree Sparrow** Seen on the rice fields.
111. **Red Avadavat** Seen on the rice fields
112. **Common Waxbill** Seen on rice fields
113. **Chaffinch** Seen daily.
114. **Serin** Seen daily.
115. **Greenfinch** Seen almost daily.
116. **Goldfinch** Seen daily.
117. **Linnet** Seen almost daily
118. **Hawfinch** Seen almost daily.

119. **Cirl Bunting** Recorded at Monfragüe.
120. **Rock Bunting** Recorded at Monfragüe.
121. **Reed Bunting** Seen at Talaván and Arrocampo.
122. **Corn Bunting** Seen daily.

Mammals seen

Egyptian Mongoose
Fox
Red Deer