

Extremadura with Shetland Wildlife

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25 April - 2 May 2015

Leaders: Judd Hunt & Martin Kelsey

Saturday 25 April

Judd met the group at London Gatwick and following a trouble-free flight we arrived in Madrid. Here we met Martin Kelsey, our host and co-guide for the week and were soon on our way westwards.

As we headed south-west we broke the journey at a service station and here we enjoyed some lovely Spanish coffee and sampled our first taste of the region's birds. We saw **Crested Larks**, **Booted Eagle**, **Red Kite**, **Red-rumped Swallow** and watched a **Zitting Cisticola** as he "zitted" through his bounding display flight. Along the way, we spotted a roadside **Black-winged Kite** sat atop a bush and had great views as we moved slowly past.

An hour later, we arrived in the quaint village of Pago de San Clemente where Martin and his wife Claudia run Casa Rural el Recuerdo. Situated just 10 kilometres from the medieval town of Trujillo and set in the foothills of the Sierra de los Lagares, this is a perfect location from which to explore Extremadura.

Prior to sitting down to a delicious dinner, the group were treated to views of a **Common Nightingale**. He had taken up residence in the gardens and chose the Judas Tree from which to deliver his powerful melody. From this spot, we also saw our first **Azure-winged Magpies** of the trip. This species is common in Extremadura but their abundance doesn't dilute its subtle beauty.

Sunday 26 April

After breakfast, we set off to explore the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca.

Our first stop provided everyone with a real flavour of the wildlife that frequents this mix of habitats. This is where Dehesa woodland adjoins semi-arid steppe and low-intensity agricultural land producing such an eclectic mix of species. Here we saw **Black and Red Kites**, huge **Griffon** and even mightier **Black Vultures** plus **Marsh Harrier** and **Common Buzzard**. However, it was the **bustards** that soon grabbed everyone's attention with good views of calling male **Little** and a group of male **Greats** being obtained.

Soon after, we spotted our first **sandgrouse** of the trip and counted a total of 14 **Pin-tailed** and five **Black-bellied** as they flew in tight formation across the plains. All

around us chunky **Calandra Larks** were singing with some seen well, both in song-flight and perched on the ground. **Short-toed Larks**, so much smaller and more sparrow-like than their cousins, were watched associating with two **Tawny Pipits** as they fed on the verges of a rough track.

The weather was dominated by some dramatic roaming thunderstorms and we spent the day successfully avoiding these by driving to other locations just prior to the downpours. However, these weather systems, passing across the undulating landscape, with the Sierra de Gredos as a backdrop, produced a beautifully dramatic vista!

A short drive took us further out into the plains, right into the heart of **Roller** country. Within no time, we were watching up to six of these stunning creatures; sometimes in flight and sometimes perched but always so beautiful. During the day, we also saw both **Bee-eaters** and **Hoopoes**. A **Little Owl** was watched while it watched us back and, more distantly, **Lesser Kestrels** were viewed.



At our picturesque riverside lunch-stop we had great views of a single **Golden Eagle** and, while admiring this majestic bird, we spotted a pair of **Bonelli's Eagles** as they soared effortlessly overhead. **Crag Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows** were close by as they hunted insects all around us and groups of **Stripe-necked Terrapins** basked on the rocky edges of the Rio Magasca.

Later in the afternoon, we stopped to overlook an area where **Montagu's Harriers** breed and were thrilled to observe breath-taking displays as stunning males courted

their concubines with acrobatic sky-dances! From this spot, we also had super views of **Booted and Short-toed Eagles** as they drifted above us. Dragging our eyes back down to earth, we watched a pair of **Red-legged Partridges** scurry past and listened to the song of a nearby **Quail**.

Throughout the day, we also had good views of **Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrikes** while small groups of **Spanish Sparrows** were noted at several locations. Although rare and localised in the UK nowadays, **Corn Buntings** were everywhere!

All too soon it seemed, we had to return to base. However, any disappointment was quickly forgotten as Martin, Claudia and their son Patrick served-up the most delicious meal which was accompanied by a glass or two of the splendid local wine.



Monday 27 April

Prior to breakfast, we watched the local **Spotless Starlings** as they sang from terracotta rooftops and **Serins** as they twisted and turned in their slowed-down, mechanical song flights. We also spotted a **Short-toed Treecreeper** who uttered his distinctive vocalisations while inching his way up the gnarled Olive Tree trunks.

Today we headed south-west and soon after departing we saw two **Great Spotted Cuckoos** which flew adjacent to our vehicles – what a start! Just prior to arriving at our first destination we turned a sharp bend in the road and flushed a migrant **Hobby** which had been feeding on a prey item. It was hard to judge who was the most shocked by the close encounter!

Stopping on the impressive dam at Embalse de Alange we witnessed the incredible aerial displays of myriads of **Alpine Swifts** that surrounded us, chattering away in “follow-my-leader” formations. Mixed in with these were smaller numbers of **Crag Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows** while out on the water, **Gull-billed Terns** were seen as they patrolled the shoreline.

From the car park, we watched a **Rock Bunting** as he sang from a rocky outcrop and a **Blue Rock Thrush** was seen delivering his melodious song-flight nearby.

As we walked along the northern fringe of the embalse, we had great views of **Thekla Larks** and a pair of **Red-rumped Swallows** which gathered mud from the path ahead of us. **Serins**, **Sardinian Warblers** and more **Rock Buntings** were seen before we located a fabulous sooty male **Black Wheatear**. He announced his presence by rising above the boulder-strewn hillside and then dropping back down to earth while vocally proclaiming his territory.

A short distance from here, we searched a rocky outcrop and soon located a magnificent adult **Eagle Owl** perched against a shady cliff-face. This was Martin’s first sighting of Europe’s largest and most powerful owl at this site!

At lunchtime, we stopped at the ancient Roman Bridge in Merida and ate our picnic while scanning across the Rio Guadiana. From here, we saw **Purple Heron** and another **Hobby** circling overhead.

Later, we walked across the historic bridge and had super views of a singing **Penduline Tit**, more **Purple Herons**, **Night Heron** and a beautiful female **Little Bittern**. Below us, we watched a family of gaudy **Purple Swamphens** as they moved so surreptitiously through the reed thickets. A few **Common Waxbills** and **Red Avadavats** were seen; both species (originating from escaped caged birds) have established significant and viable populations in the region.

To end the day, we drove to a newly created Embalse at Alcollarin which is just a 20 minute drive from Martin’s Guesthouse. What a place! From the vehicles, we immediately noted a group of ten dusky **Black Terns** which were feeding in association with 8 stunning **Collared Pratincoles**. We were all transfixed as we watched these graceful birds hawking insects above the water!

We began to notice other species and the highlights in the vicinity were a group of 12 **Spoonbills**, four **Great Egrets**, **Little, Gull-billed and Common Terns**, **Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes**, **Greylag Goose**, **Red-crested and Common Pochards**, **Shovelers**, **Gadwalls**, **Wigeon**, **Short-toed Eagle**, **Black-winged Stilts**, **Greenshank**, **Redshank**, **Wood and Common Sandpipers**, **Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers**, **Dunlin** and a dapper male “Spanish” **Yellow Wagtail**.

Driving home from here, a large group of **Cattle Egrets** were seen roosting on the banks of a watering hole and this ended another fantastic day’s bird watching.

Tuesday 28 April

Today, we drove a short distance south of our base and began to search the Campo Lugar Plains.

From a quiet road, we scanned the area and soon located a group of nine male **Great Bustards**. A few of these were half-heartedly displaying - the absence of any females (by now incubating eggs) probably explained their lacklustre efforts! two **Little Bustards** were seen flying in and one landed near to the group of Greats allowing a direct size comparison; Greats really are great but any inferiority complexes suffered by the Littles doesn't explain the recent dwindling of their population.



Many **Calandra Larks** were signing all around us and more distant **Lesser Kestrels** could be seen hunting in small groups. Nearby, a pair of **Stone Curlews** were found as they attempted to conceal themselves during their daytime roost. Several **Rollers** were also seen at this location.

We moved on south, via Embalse de Sierra Brava and Madrigalejo where we noted a group of vultures descending to feed on an animal carcass. As we watched the party of **Griffons** squabbling over the carrion, a gigantic **Black Vulture** glided down and interrupted the party, asserting itself at the top of the vulture pecking order! Later, we found a small colony of **Sand Martins** nesting in some excavated earth-diggings – this is quite a localised breeding species in this region.

Lunchtime saw us at the impressive Mirador which overlooks the craggy peaks at Puerto Pena. At this superb stop, our lunch-break was constantly interrupted as fantastic birds were continually spotted; **Alpine Swifts**, **Crag and House Martins** and **Red-rumped Swallows** swept across the ridges, several **Red-billed Choughs** were seen flying across the river valley, three **Black Storks** circled overhead, two

stunning **Egyptian Vultures** joined the throng of **Griffons**, a **Blue Rock Thrush** was watched in song-flight and a **Golden Oriole** was typically hard to see.

On our way back north, we stopped at Rio Fernando where we encountered some excellent riverine habitat. Warblers were much in evidence and we had splendid views of **Melodious** and **Great Reed warblers** plus **Zitting Cisticola**. The many skulking **Cetti's Warblers** proved much more challenging to pin-down. Several **Common Waxbills** were also seen as they fed in the reed beds and a migrant **Garden Warbler** was also noted.

Before heading back to base, we stopped again at Alcollarin and spent time scanning the embalse and its fringes. Most of the species noted the previous day were still present although **Black Tern** numbers had dwindled to a single bird but two beautiful **Whiskered Terns** had joined the "Marsh Tern" Party.

After dinner we walked the tracks above our village and, while listening to the enchanting song of a **Woodlark**, were stunned by fabulous views of a **Red-necked Nightjar** as he displayed just overhead in the fading light. What a way to end another glorious day!

Wednesday 29 April

We began the day by returning to the plains between Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca.

Soon after disembarking the vehicles we spotted a male **Montagu's Harrier** and a group of four **Great Bustards**. However, our highlight here was a party of five **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and we obtained decent views as they sat motionless on the ground. There was some relief gained by this sighting as several members of the group had missed seeing this species the previous Sunday.



From here, we drove north and after a pleasant journey (seeing birds like **Bee-eaters**, **Hoopoes** and **Booted Eagles** along the way) we arrived in Monfrague National Park. This area is famous internationally for the wealth of wildlife found here and also for its stunning scenery.

We made our way slowly through and soon spotted a male **Western Black-eared Wheatear** perched on the roadside. A well placed viewing area allowed us to pull off the road and obtain some wonderful views of this beautiful sandy-coloured wheatear as he sang from surrounding cistus bushes. Some members of the group also saw a few **Red Deers** during the drive and a couple of **Alpine Swifts** were seen associating with the local population of **House Martins**.

Before long, we reached the Watch Point overlooking the cliffs at Tietar and were immediately greeted by incredible views of a **Spanish Imperial Eagle** as it flew across the flooded valley between us and the rock-face. There aren't enough superlatives to describe this regal bird but the looks on everyone's face spoke a thousand words!



From a different angle, we were able to view the eagle's nest and were privileged to watch the adult birds as they returned with prey that had been gathered out on the plains beyond. We noted how gently these powerful hunters behaved as they fed their white, fluffy chick small pieces of flesh, stripped from an unseen carcass in the floor of the nest.

Also here, we had great views of six **Black Storks**, two **Black**, four **Egyptian** and dozens of **Griffon Vultures**, **Short-toed Eagle**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, several dapper male **Western Subalpine Warblers** and **Rock Buntings**.

At our regular coffee stop, we saw a couple of **Rock Sparrows** although obtaining good views as they sat calling in the oak trees proved quite a challenge! Also here, we heard the rich, fruity song of a distant **Western Orphean Warbler** and saw both **Azure-winged Magpies** and **Woodchat Shrikes**.

Later in the day, we stopped at the impressive Pena Falcon – a large outcrop of rock that is home to a large colony of **Griffon Vultures** and spent the remainder of the afternoon here. We experienced the most incredible views of these huge birds as some flew past at eye level and others soared just 20 metres or so overhead. You could literally hear the wind rushing through their feathers as they made their way to and from the nesting sites! Very aptly, we also saw a **Peregrine Falcon** circling high above us while **Black Redstarts**, **Serins**, **Blue Rock Thrushes**, **Rock Buntings** and **Red-rumped Swallows** all sang from nearby perches. A few lucky members of the group also managed brief views of an **Otter** swimming in the water below but, unfortunately, most of us missed seeing it.

After dinner, we walked the quiet lanes of our village and were rewarded with some fantastic views of two calling **Scop's Owls** and a **Little Owl** in the grounds of the local church before retiring for a well-earned night's sleep.



Thursday 30 April

We began today by journeying to the north-east and stopped at an outstanding area of heathland dominated by lavender and broom, near to the town of Jaraicejo.

As soon as we decamped from the vehicles we were watching singing **Dartford** and **Spectacled Warblers** with a supporting cast of many **Thekla Larks** and **Corn Buntings**. Everyone had super views of the male **Spectacleds** (looking like diminutive, more brightly coloured Whitethroats) but more time plus a lot of patience was required before everyone obtained similar views of the notoriously skulking **Dartfords!**

Overhead, birds of prey were much in evidence as we noted **Griffon and Black Vultures**, **Black and Red Kites** and **Booted and Short-toed Eagles**.

A walk through some adjacent cork oak woodland produced sightings of **Short-toed Treecreepers**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Long-tailed Tits**. We also paused by the small reservoir of the Arroyo de la Vid where we had magnificent views of **Nightingale**, as well, after much patience, sightings of **Western Orphean Warbler**. **Golden Orioles** and **Melodious Warblers** added to the soundscape.

Heading northwards, we drove up to the pass at Casas de Miravete where we stopped. The view north from here is stunning with the vast plains and wetlands in the foreground being bordered in the distance by the partly shrouded Sierra de Gredos. We soon saw **Woodlarks** (one of which delivered his beautiful song from the overhead power lines!), **Rock Buntings** and had fleeting views of a juvenile **Ocellated Lizard** before heading back towards Trujillo.

To end the afternoon, we stopped at the famous Bullring on the outskirts of Trujillo. This location owes its fame to the colony of **Lesser Kestrels** that nest under the terracotta roof tiles and the views one can obtain here are just out of this world! Both males and females were constantly in view with birds flying overhead and perched on the Bullring often uttering their distinctive harsh calls. From the same spot, we also had great views of **Spotless Starlings**, a very close **Black Kite** and a couple of **Pallid Swifts**.

After dinner, we couldn't resist another try for the **Red-necked Nightjars** and were treated to another fine display by the local male bird!

Friday 1 May

Our last full day saw us travelling up into the Sierra de Gredos. Along the way, we broke the journey by stopping for some time at a superb wetland habitat.

We made a few stops in the area of Arrocampo and obtained great views of many of the birds on offer. Highlights of our time here were: female **Little Bittern**, **Little and Great Egrets**, **Grey and lots of Purple Herons**, **White Storks**, **Purple Swamphens**, **Marsh Harriers** and at least four **Savi's Warblers!**

Stopping along the way towards the higher parts of the mountains we encountered several signing **Western Bonelli's Warblers** but, despite our best efforts, **Hawfinch** and **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** were only seen by the guides.

At our lunch stop, we had some great views of more **Western Bonelli's Warblers** and also added **Dunnock** and **Common Whitethroat** to the trip list. Several **Western Subalpine Warblers** were seen nearby as were more **Woodlarks** with one male deciding to perch in a tree right next to us to deliver his song! The nearby town of Piornal, the highest town in Extremadura at just under four thousand feet above sea-level, hosts an impressive **Pallid Swift** colony which we stopped to enjoy it.

We eventually reached our highest point of our journey where the tallest granite peaks surrounding us were still snow-clad. After a short walk, we located our target species here and had good 'scope views of a singing **Ortolan Bunting**, its far-carrying sweet but plaintive song being particularly evocative of these moorlands.

Saturday 2 May

All too soon it was time to say goodbye to our hosts and following our exchange of farewells with both Claudia and Patrick, we headed off towards Madrid. Our stay at Casa Rural el Recuerdo had been wonderful; from the tranquillity and beauty of the property to the consistently wonderful food and charming company of the Kelsey family – we couldn't have asked for more.

To break-up the journey back to the airport we revisited Arrocampo wetlands but this time we focussed on the area to the west of yesterday's visit. This move paid off as we located only our second **Black-winged Kite** of the trip plus our second sighting of **Great Spotted Cuckoo**. Other highlights included stupendous views of **Bee-eaters** near a colony plus some really good views of **Melodious Warbler** and **Zitting Cisticolas**.

We arrived at the airport in good time and said our heartfelt thanks and warm goodbyes to Martin. Few, if any people know more about the natural history of Extremadura and I doubt anybody could be more keen to share their knowledge than Martin – I know I can't wait until my next visit so that I can learn more about this fascinating region!

Thank You Janet & Cyril, Maurice & Pamela, Philip & Joyce, Clare, Marion and Simon & Alison!