



Bad Boys Birding: Extremadura 15 to 19 December 2016

Extremadura is one of my favourite birding destinations. I have been several times in what I thought was the spring time, early May; but I have now learnt that spring comes much earlier in Extremadura. We (Wilf, Danny & Tom) were guided by Martin Kelsey and warmly hosted by him and his wife, Claudia, at their lovely farm house Casa Rural El Recuerdo - 10km south of the medieval town of Trujillo, in the Pago de San Clemente ⁽¹⁾. He met us off our flight at Madrid and drove us to his home. It was too dark to do any birding en route. The next morning was our first chance to see our surroundings. The garden and the village are very attractive. Almost the first birds we saw were Azure-winged Magpies and a Hoopoe in the garden. The weather forecast was for a wet first day to be followed by drier and warmer days.

We used the vehicle as a shelter and hide as we drove across the plains (in Spain where the rain stays) south-west of Santa Marta de Magasca and took an un-metalled road across to the Caceres-Torrejon El Rubio road. We were impressed by the number and variety of birds we found in such unpromising weather. It was illuminating being shown up close the differences between Crested and Thekla Larks.



There were groups of Great and Little Bustard. Raptors appeared regularly, including: Red Kites; Marsh Harrier; Hen Harrier; Common Buzzard; Merlin and Kestrel. Birds that were not common for us included: Cattle Egret; White Stork; Common Crane; Golden Plover; Black Redstart; Zitting Cisticola; Southern Grey Shrike; Spotless Starling; Serin; Hoopoe; Pin-tailed Sandgrouse; Calandra Lark; Crag Martin and Spanish Sparrow. Later in the day when the rain stopped we started seeing Griffon and Black Vultures.



Martin provides a great DIY picnic which we had while birding at the Talavan Reservoir. On our way back we warmed up with coffee and brandy in a bar in Monroy. We explored a small part of some old drovers ways admiring the big dramatic skies and panoramic views while Martin predicted the beauty of the flowers that would be blooming along the tracks in only a few months time.



Later sitting by the open fire with a bottle of the good local red wine we agreed that it had been a very enjoyable day in spite of the rain and we were looking forward to the better weather and the new locations to come.

The next day was dry and bright with a fresh breeze. We explored an area I had not been to before - the rice fields south of Trujillo near Madrigalejo. The big flocks of Common Crane were beautiful. We had close up views of them feeding and sweeping views of them flying.



We also had close views of White Storks and Water Pipits paddling alongside Meadow Pipits for comparison. At one memorable stop we found a Great Bittern standing right next to us in the edge of the flooded field. It tried to vanish by freezing before stalking stealthily away into the reeds.



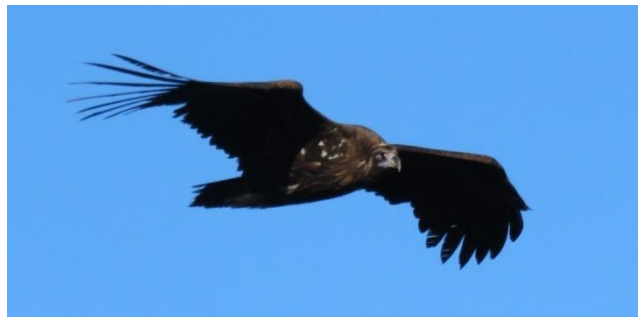


A special tractor was ploughing a rice field. As it turned over the stubble and churned up the water it was followed by a flock of white birds that included: Great White Egrets; Little Egrets; Cattle Egrets; gulls and wagtails.



Danny spotted a Gull-billed Tern - a very unusual sighting for this time of year. We moved to the Alcollarin Reservoir where we had lunch before looking for the reported rare ducks. We found a Ferruginous Duck ourselves before Martin showed his class and perseverance by finding a female Smew and a Ring-necked Duck in spite of the distance; poor visibility and number of other birds. Spanish birders turned up looking for the Smew - a Spanish twitch no less. It was the first record for Extremadura and only about the 20th for Spain. While we were looking a Black Stork flew past. (Later we also found a Scaup in Wilf's photos of the flocks of ducks). Martin drove us back across the plains from Campo Lugar that he could show us roosting Stone Curlew in the corner of a field next to a farm - again demonstrating the great value of local knowledge.

The next morning we set out for Monfrague Park in sunshine and a brisk breeze. On our way we stopped to photograph some black fighting bulls through their reinforced fencing and found Red-legged Partridge standing by the road.



We started by taking the walk around the peak up to the remains of the castle. New paths and viewing platforms have been built since my last visit. We tried to capture in photographs the majestic Griffon and Black Vultures as they glided past us at eye level. The challenge was to catch one in front of the almost-full moon which was still shining.



Next at the Salto de Gitano river and cliffs we watched large numbers of vultures and a very visible Blue Rock Thrush.



After a detour to the Puerta de Monfrague for a coffee we moved upstream to the Portilla del Tietar. Almost immediately Martin found a Spanish Imperial Eagle soaring with the vultures over the rocks and woods. It started mobbing some of the Griffon Vultures - once even going so far as tangling talons with one of them and dropping down to the trees. We had our picnic overlooking the dam. Later we walked by the river Tagus from the Fuente de Frances. It is good advice to check out prominent white objects in far trees. This one proved to be a Bonelli's Eagle. It flew along the river and circled back gaining height. We had extended if distant views over a period of time.



We ended the afternoon at the crossing of the river Almonte near Jaraicejo where three road bridges have been built in parallel over several hundred years. The blues of the sky and the water and the greens of the plants were vivid in the late sunshine. During the day the additions to our list included: Sparrowhawk; Peregrine; Short-toed Treecreeper; Red-billed Chough and Hawfinch.

Next morning while we were having breakfast in the old wine cellar we were entertained by the garden Hoopoe peering in at the window. Sadly this was the last day of our short adventure. But we still had time for some good birding on the way back to Madrid. We walked around part of the



marshes at the Arrocampo Reservoir at Saucedilla. Here the distant white object in a tree turned out to be a Black-winged Kite. Later a second one joined it and the pair danced together in the sky.



We heard and then saw several Purple Swamphen climbing on the reeds. A Little Bittern flew across a channel and then appeared briefly among the stems. A Dunnock, uncommon here, generated unaccustomed interest. Bluethroats and Penduline Tits, more common here than we are used to, also attracted us. Two Barn Swallows were unusual for December. We explored the old quarry, Cerro de Almaraz, above the marshes and looked wistfully the pictures of the array of unusual orchids and fungi that will reappear there in the new year.

During the three and a half day trip we saw some 124 species of birds and discovered that Extremadura is a good place to go in our winter to enjoy their spring.

(1) We stayed at Casa Rural El Recuerdo with Martin and Claudia Kelsey.

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Tom Howard-Jones

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