

Extremadura with Shetland Wildlife

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22 - 29 April 2017

Leaders: Judd Hunt & Martin Kelsey

Tour report & images by Shetland Wildlife tour participant Christopher Teague

Saturday 22nd April 2017

The group met our guide Judd Hunt at London Gatwick and we soon boarded our flight to Madrid. After meeting Martin Kelsey, who would be both our host and co-guide for the week, we picked up our minibus and began the journey to the heart of Extremadura.

We stopped halfway along the route near Gamonal and this was where we encountered our first Crested Lark of the holiday as it foraged around the car park. We noted a splendid migrant Whinchat perched on a bush and also saw a Moorish Gecko on the outside wall of the cafe. Then we were treated to a beautiful Booted Eagle as it soared overhead! Later that day, we arrived at Martin's home village of Pago de San Clemente which is situated 10 kilometres south of the ancient town of Trujillo. We saw a male Serin in a nearby field and also spotted a White Stork as it flew overhead. Extremadura is a fantastic place to see Spotless Starlings and here we encountered the first of many; at this time of year, these birds completely replace the "Common" European Starlings in the Iberian Peninsula, although both species occur in winter. Everyone agreed that this was an amazing place and today had whetted the appetite for all that was to come!

Sunday 23rd April 2017

Our first full day in Extremadura began on the plains between Trujillo, Santa Marta De Magasca & Caceres. The first birds we saw were Spanish Sparrows perched on the fence posts. Other birds in the area were a very showy Thekla Lark singing on a fence post plus a few distant Great Bustards on the plains. Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were seen as they made a few fly-pasts and while we were walking along a track, we spotted a small snake which we later confirmed as a Montpellier Snake. A Green-striped White Butterfly was seen resting with its wings closed and then a European Bee-eater flew overhead. Extremadura is probably the best place in Europe for its number of Corn Buntings and we saw literally hundreds!

Later, we saw our first Montagu's Harrier as a stunning male foraged on the ground before taking off and flying into the distance. We then had wonderful views as both Griffon & Black Vultures soared overhead – how big are they?! We watched dapper

Spanish Sparrows as they were drinking from some pools and then saw a real bonus bird in the form of a migrant male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. This species breeds in high, mountainous regions and the closest suitable habitat is in the Sierra de Gredos, 100 kilometres to the north.

On the opposite side of the road we spotted 2 Iberian Grey Shrikes which are quite distinct from the Great Greys we sometimes see at home. Further along, we had excellent views of at least 10 European Rollers as they displayed and guarded their purpose-built nest boxes. Some of the Roller-free nest boxes were also being used by squatting Little Owls and Jackdaws!



After a fantastic morning, we stopped for lunch alongside a valley and here we saw Western Dappled White Butterfly, Bath White, Spanish Marbled White, Black-eyed Blue Butterfly, Spanish Terrapin and 2 migrant Ortolan Buntings.

A Western Orphean Warbler was heard singing from the adjacent hillside but we couldn't locate him. However we then saw a Red Kite as it quickly flew overhead while being chased by a pair of gaudy Azure-winged Magpies.

The afternoon was spent searching around the farmland to the west of Trujillo. The first creature to catch the eye was a Continental Swallowtail which is similar to the British

race found in the Norfolk Broads. We also saw a Fan-tailed Warbler, nowadays referred to as "Zitting Cisticola". A pair of Montagu's Harriers were seen hunting and displaying over the nearby fields; the male is similar to a male Hen Harrier except that its build is more rakish and has black barring on the upper & underwings. The female, by comparison is very like a female Hen Harrier although a bit more buff and orange coloured and of a skinnier build. We then spotted a Calandra Lark while he was singing from a boulder before and also recorded Red-striped Oil Beetles, Broad-bodied Chasers, Western Clubtail Dragonfly and dainty Short-toed Larks. A couple of Orchids were found by Martin and we saw both Heart-flowered Tongue & Bug Orchids.

On our way back to Trujillo, we spotted a Black Kite perched on top of a building and saw others as they patrolled over the road in search of road-killed carrion to feed on.

After dinner we took a stroll above the village to look for Red-necked Nightjars. The first bird of the evening was a Wryneck and we watched him while he sang from a dead tree and then we spotted a Short-toed Treecreeper in the adjacent woodland. We waited a while before the nightjar appeared and then he performed brilliantly overhead; unlike the European Nightjar, which has churring song, Red-necked Nightjar has a very distinctive, hollow "knocking" song and also has a rufous neck-collar and is bigger too. Anita spotted it singing in an Olive tree and we had great views! After a while, it flew off to begin its night-time hunting routine so we headed back to the guesthouse seeing a Cicada & Marbled Newt along the way.

Monday 24th April 2017

Our early morning walk began at 7:15am and we strolled along Church Lane. We saw Corn Buntings, Woodchat Shrikes, Hoopoe, White Stork & a brief view of Azure-winged Magpies.

After breakfast, we headed to the plains south of Trujillo at Campo Lugar. Here we saw a distant male Little Bustard displaying and listened to his raspberry-like calls. This species has declined rapidly in recent years and changing farming practices are thought to be a major contributor to this. A Hoopoe was calling from a dry stone wall, a Black-winged Kite flew west and a Marsh Harrier flew east! Another Black-winged Kite hovered above the fields and then a female Montagu's Harrier flew along the road right towards us, landing briefly before taking off again – what a view and what a spate of sightings!

We travelled the short distance towards Sierra Brava Reservoir and on the opposite side of the road was a building that was being used by nesting Lesser Kestrels. The female is very much like its Common Kestrel counterpart but with slivery-white underwings and showing the elongated central tail feathers. The male has a blue panel in the wing, plain grey cheeks and an unmarked chestnut back. Nearby, we had fabulous views of a pair of beautiful Black-eared Wheatears. We then saw a Booted Eagle flying right overhead and a Stone Curlew was resting amongst some vegetation.

Further along the road there was another Hoopoe perched on a rock and another male Black-eared Wheatear on the fence. We then encountered a flock of European Bee-eaters and one used a crash barrier for a perch giving brilliant views. A breath-taking 10 minute spell of birdwatching was appreciated by all!

Later, we stopped near the rice fields at Madrigalejo to search the riverine habitat there and we saw Great Reed Warblers, Melodious Warbler, Golden Oriole (heard only) and Penduline Tit. A short distance away, we stopped alongside a bridge and here we saw a White Stork on the nest and then a Spotted Crake creeping around on the mud at the base of the reed beds – a real surprise find and a new species for many of the group!

We had lunch at the viewpoint of Puerta Pena which overlooks an impressive craggy mountainside. Here we saw quite a few Griffon Vultures, Black Storks, Alpine Swifts plus some of the group saw a Golden Oriole in the trees overhanging the river. Two Bonelli's Eagles gave great views as they flew in and landed on a hillside pylon and we were able to see the size difference between the male and female.



Our final port of call was a small reservoir which is used to supply the rice fields but the water levels were low which had exposed lots of muddy areas. The birds seen here were Kentish Plovers, Ringed Plovers, Little Ringed Plovers, Avocets, Little Stints, Common Sandpipers, Wood Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts, Dunlins and the star birds, graceful Collared Pratincoles, some of which gave fantastic views as they flew and hunted insects overhead.



After returning to base, we found a Marsh Fritillary in the garden of Martin's guesthouse and later that evening, we managed to see some Azure-winged Magpies perched as the light was fading.

Tuesday 25th April 2017

We had an early morning walk around the village and the first bird we saw was a showy Nightingale singing from the tree. An Azure-winged Magpie was on the path further ahead but David was the only member of the group to spot a Melodious Warbler, much to the chagrin of his son, Chris! However, there would be more to come....

After breakfast, we headed south to the dam at Alange Reservoir where there is a colony of Alpine Swifts. This is the largest colony in Extremadura and we had great views as they flew around us and into their nesting cavities within the dam walls. Also from here, we watched Gull-billed Terns as they were flying around the reservoir and a Purple Heron flew over the dam. The nearby rocky outcrops provided the perfect habitat for both Rock Buntings and the increasingly rare Black Wheatears; we weren't disappointed and enjoyed great views of both species. A pair of Crag Martins were seen collecting mud from the path to build their nest and Thekla Larks and Sardinian Warblers were calling everywhere!

We then drove north towards Merida where we stopped near the ancient Roman Bridge to have lunch. We saw a Black-crowned Night Heron and a Little Bittern flying past plus a Hoopoe was foraging nearby and occasionally giving a high-pitch contact call. We saw a couple of Glossy Ibis flying past and a male Serin was singing from the roof of a nearby house. From the Roman Bridge we saw many Cattle Egrets, Red-eared Terrapins, Pallid Swifts, Golden Oriole and a Purple Swamphen was well-watched in the reed bed below us.

The afternoon was spent at Alcollorin Reservoir and here we saw more Gull-billed Terns plus Black-necked Grebes, Cattle Egrets, Spoonbills, White Storks, Red-rumped Swallows, Woodchat Shrikes, Common Sandpiper and a Scarlet Darter dragonfly.

Back near the guesthouse, a pair of Sardinian Warblers were showing well and a Black Kite flew right overhead. We also managed to get excellent views of Azure-winged Magpies on the ground while a Corn Bunting was singing from a fence post and a Zitting Cisticola was "zitting" over the field.

Wednesday 26th April 2017

We had an early morning walk around the village and the star birds were a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos which gave great views as they fed in the low bushes and scrub. Also, we heard a distant Woodlark and a male Sardinian Warbler showed well outside the house just before we returned for breakfast.

Later, we made our way to Monfrague National Park, stopping near Trujillo to look for Great Spotted Cuckoos. We didn't see any that morning but we did see a Knapweed Fritillary and an Iberian Grey Shrike.

In Monfrague National Park we saw hundreds of Griffon Vultures, Peregrine, several stunning male Blue Rock Thrushes, Crag Martins, Rock Buntings, Subalpine Warbler, Black Storks and Red-rumped Swallow from the viewpoint at the aptly-named Pena Falcon.

The next viewpoint at Puerto Tietar overlooked the Rio Tietar and another large rock-face. We saw lots more Griffon Vultures and could see several chicks poking their heads above the twiggy nests. A couple of smaller Egyptian Vultures showed well as they flew above the valley and we had great views when they landed briefly. The viewpoint overlooks a nest site of Spanish Imperial Eagles but sadly the chick died a few days previously, possibly due to the lack of their main prey, rabbits. Despite this, we had good but brief views of one adult as it patrolled the area and it disappeared from view when it joined a "kettle" of circling vultures.

After lunch we stopped for coffee at the northern edge of the National Park. The Rock Sparrows that breed here weren't easy to see and kept giving brief perched or flight views only. A Western Orphean Warbler was singing nearby but remained hidden while a beautiful male Golden Oriole showed well at times.

On the way back through the Park we stopped in a small pine forest and here we saw Mediterranean Speckled Wood and Spanish Gatekeeper butterflies, Serins, a pair of Crested Tits and a Booted Eagle.

In more open habitat, a Red Deer hind was seen briefly feeding before walking into the bushes for shade and then we managed good views of 2 Western Orphean Warblers as they fed in Tamarisk and Rock Rose bushes.

At another viewpoint within the National Park, we had a treetop view of a pair of Golden Orioles and a gorgeous Bonelli's Eagle flew overhead!

After having a tip-off concerning a pair of Scop's Owls roosting in a local park the previous evening, we stopped in Madronera on the way back to the guesthouse. With the help of some local children, we soon had amazing views of the pair of European Scop's Owls roosting in a tree during broad daylight – local knowledge is a wonderful thing!!

Thursday 27th April 2017

As with previous mornings, we started the day with a walk around the village before breakfast. A pair of Short-toed Treecreepers were seen feeding youngsters in an old building and some Goldfinches were feeding along the track ahead.

After breakfast we headed to Jaraicejo. To the east lies area of pristine heathland and the first bird we saw here was a Black Vulture as it drifted lazily over us; it's one of Europe's biggest Vulture species and even larger than the commoner Griffons! Dartford Warblers perched briefly but eventually gave everyone good views. Thekla Larks and Corn Buntings sang from bushes and wires plus we saw Queen of Spain Fritillaries along the track. Our main target here proved difficult to find in the breezy weather but eventually we found a singing male Spectacled Warbler who showed briefly in flight but better when perched-up on the gorse.

On the way to Arrocampo we stopped alongside a river and found a Melodious Warbler, Subalpine Warbler and an Orphean Warbler.

At Arrocampo, we saw a Purple Gallinule fly into the reeds, a female Little Bittern showed well at the back of a small pond and a pair of Stonechats were feeding youngsters. We saw a couple of Northern Banded Groundlings and Long Skimmers, two species of dragonfly that have recently colonised Spain from Africa. A male Little Bittern flew low across to the reeds on the other side and we heard our first Savi's Warbler reeling but it was not seen.

We drove around the wetlands where we saw Great White Egret, Cattle Egrets, Little Egret, Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilts and a couple of European Bee-eaters perched on the fence posts.



Back near Arrocampo, a couple of Purple Herons flew over and a Savi's Warbler showed well on top of the reeds whilst delivering its reeling song. Sadly, this individual had its tail missing, possibly lost it in a battle with other territorial males! A Spoonbill flew overhead and landed out of sight and a Black-crowned Night Heron flew past but a group of Squacco Herons stole the show as they are very unpredictable at this site.

We then went to an area near Almaraz to search for Eagle Owl and we found a juvenile sitting on a rock along the cliff-face. The adults were probably nearby roosting in a cave but keeping a close eye on proceedings! It was also a place for a rare and special orchids - we saw the Almaraz Bee Orchid; this species is found in this part of Extremadura and nowhere else on earth! Also in flower were Woodcock Orchids and we then found a False Ilex Hairstreak butterfly. A Booted Eagle flew over and we heard Cirl Buntings singing on the other side of the quarry, but they couldn't be located.

Friday 28th April 2017

Our last full day in Extremadura began with an early morning walk. A Corn Bunting was singing from a small bush but we struggled to find much else in the deteriorating weather. The weather dictated a change of plans as searching for wildlife in the Sierra de Gredos would have been extremely difficult in low cloud and rain. The previous days had all been very pleasant - hot and dry – what a contrast!

So after breakfast, we headed back to the plains between Trujillo, Caceres & Santa

Marta De Magasca for some more sightings of Spanish Sparrows and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. It was quite a cold day and we didn't see any Great Bustards, butterflies or snakes this time. We still had great views of both Thekla and Crested Larks on the fence posts though. Fewer European Rollers were perched on the wires on this visit but further along the road we had excellent views of an adult Great Spotted Cuckoo perched on the fence at close quarters. A couple of Short-toed Larks were foraging on the road and the group could see how small and sandy-coloured they looked in comparison to the more familiar Skylarks at home.

We returned to the drained reservoir near Vegas Altas and saw more Collared Pratincoles but the weather was getting worse. We found a Temminck's Stint plus Curlew Sandpipers, Sanderlings and Spotted Redshank were added to the wader list. We drove back along a dirt track towards Vegas Altas where we found some European Bee-eaters sheltering from the rain. Whilst watching these Judd made a very exciting discovery in the form of a first-summer Blue-cheeked Bee-eater which was the first for Extremadura and only the 9th record for Spain – even rarer than in the UK!. This could have been a bird from Morocco where the nearest breeding colonies exist. It dropped down onto the ground for a while looking rather bedraggled and forlorn but then it perched-up on the fence line and, after coughing up a pellet, it flew off with the other Bee-eaters. Despite being looked for later that day by other birdwatchers, it was never seen again – how lucky were we?!



There were a few more European Bee-eaters further along the track and a Turtle Dove was well-watched as it perched in a nearby tree. Later we saw a flock of Turtle Doves near the rice fields and lamented upon how rare this species has now become in the

UK. Further along, we saw some Red Avadavats in the field, an introduced species of Indian origin. Near Madrigalejo, we saw a couple of perched Collared Pratincoles in the flooded fields before we made our way back to the guesthouse to prepare ourselves for the journey home the following day.

Saturday 29th April 2017

After breakfast, we headed back along the motorway towards Madrid. We stopped halfway to get fuel before completing our journey to Madrid Airport where we said goodbye to Martin and catching our flight back to London Gatwick.

