

Holiday Highlights
Spanish Birds and Botany
26 March – 2 April 2022

Guides: Martin Kelsey and Kate Mennie

Guest: Peter Warden

Day 1: We meet at Gatwick airport in plenty time to check in our bags, before our flight at 11am. One smooth flight later and a swift exit through passport checks, we collect our bags and are met by Martin in arrivals. We have a spot of lunch before our drive south out of Madrid. A three hour drive is filled with views of the ever changing landscapes and foliage, like Rock Rose and White Broom. A spot of bird watching too, with Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, White Storks, Cattle Egret and Griffon Vulture. We arrive in Madronera at the hotel about 5pm, with time to relax before a short stroll into the park across the road at dusk where we hear a Scops Owl. Two owls fly from a close tree into the darkness, calling a couple of minutes later. With the park closing we head back, enjoying our first meal by the fire.

Day 2: Martin meets us after breakfast and we look at a map to get our bearings and discuss the week and days plan. Leaving at 9am, we head south to our first stop at the plains of Campo Lugar, the sunrise makes for a beautiful light across the plain and there is a cool morning breeze. We are barely out of the minibus when Martin spots our first Great Bustard, in full display exposing their white feathers with tail and facial feathers fanned. We see at least twenty more males across the plains. We spot a couple of Little Bustards behind the Great but these are a little far to see. We are being serenaded by the sound of singing Zitting Cisticola, Corn Bunting and Calandra Lark, which doesn't seem to take a breath our whole week. In the skies above us, there are Lesser Kestrel and Marsh Harrier, with distant Griffon Vulture. A pair of Hoopoe fly towards us, briefly landing and calling as they fly. Martin suddenly hears a Stone Curlew and we get fabulous views of it amongst the 'dog tooth' rocky landscape. To finish off our first amazing location, we also see and hear some Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

We go back along this road for now, stopping not far away at the Sierra Brava reservoir. There are Crag Martins and a singing Serin to greet us. We check the water for any wintering duck, but with it being busy with fishers it is a little quiet. There are a few Great Crested Grebe and a pair of Egyptian Geese. In the sky Griffon Vulture fly over and some beautiful Black Kite. We drive down through the paddy fields, stopping to look at our first Spanish Sparrows. Round the corner as we head towards Madrigalejo where there is a good chance for Black-winged Kites, so we park up. Kate spots an Iberian Grey Shrike on the wires, along with one or two more in the area. There are plenty of Lesser Kestrel and White Stork nesting in every tree, Red and Black Kite overhead. Martin suddenly spots what we are hoping for, a Black-winged Kite. It seems to be defending its territory and

lands visible to us on a nearby tree. Its bright red eyes showing in the sunshine, contrasted with its yellow feet and bill. We watch it nest building and preening for a while, giving us fantastic views when it perched.

We head to a bridge at Rio Ruecas to find some water birds and have lunch. We see and hear many species in the reeds, Spoonbill and Little Egrets along the river edge, Green Sandpiper and Kingfisher. A different call is heard as Martin gets excited, shouting 'Bee-eater'. The first ones of the year. They don't come closer unfortunately. Common Waxbills fly over and also three Collared Pratincole, which Martin hears coming. A great spot for lunch with many species to add to our growing list. Along the road, Woodchat Shrike, which have also just arrived are sitting along the fence line. We journey back through the plains where we were first thing, stopping to look at Common Redstart and Red-legged Partridge. As we get out, a Bath White Butterfly lands close, called this due to its wing patterning seemingly resembling an 18th century Bath embroidery, new knowledge to Martin. We stop briefly at a small village where Red-rumped Swallow and House Martins are nesting and two Violet carpenter Bees catch Peter's eye.

We spend the afternoon exploring Alcollarín reservoir and wetland. Overlooking the water we see a large flock of Coot, Little Egret, Little Grebe and hear our first Cuckoo. We have heard there was a drake Garganey around, which would be a life bird for Peter, so we head to the wetland to search. From the viewing platform we see Night Heron, Little Egret, Gadwall, Shoveler and Great Crested Grebe. Along the edge of the water, Snipe, Yellow Wagtail, Black-winged Stilt and Greenshank are wading. Above us, Griffon and Black Vulture glide overhead, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier followed by both Booted and Short-toed Eagle. Amazing what you can see when you look up! We continue round the reserve by vehicle, Martin spotting a brief Montagu's Harrier, with its beautiful shiny plumage. To the south end of the reserve, we scan out for Garganey, but none here today. A Clouded Yellow Butterfly flies by and Kate spots a Large Psammmodromus. We retrace our steps and head to the other side of this large reservoir, where the wind picks up making it a bit choppy. We do manage to add Black-neck Grebe to our list. One last attempt for a life bird, we head back to the wetland, where we miss the Garganey for that day, but do hear a lovely Nightingale. Over ninety birds seen on our first day, we head back to the hotel, to have a much-earned break before dinner at 8.30pm.

Day 3: With the prospect of a nice day, Kate braves wearing shorts, which she later regrets! We head off past Trujillo and arrive onto a small road towards Santa Marta into the 'dehesa' landscape that is typical for this area. On the brow of the hill we stop when we notice a large flock of Great Bustards, with a couple already displaying. Our ears are once again ringing with the songs of Corn Bunting and Larks around us as we set up the scopes. We enjoy watching the Great Bustards strutting their stuff when there is an eruption of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse behind us as they call and disperse into the sky. They fly so close we can see the characteristic pale bellies and long pointed tails and hear their 'crow' like calls.

We are treated to many views of close Thekla Lark as Martin describes the different plumage features when he suddenly hears Great Spotted Cuckoo. We retrace our steps to a bend in the road where a pair of Magpies are. Great Spotted Cuckoo choose large host birds to parasite the nest, so it is good to watch the behaviour of Magpies. Whilst we keep an eye out, Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrike are close-by and a Hoopoe calls. We get a glimpse of a Cuckoo and after waiting a few minutes the pair of Magpies suddenly lift and charge across the road, chasing off two Great Spotted Cuckoos! The chase begins between the two pairs as they fly past the nest site, the Magpies protecting the nest with some amazing aggression calls and the Great Spotted Cuckoo working as a team to try and get close. It is quite a battle to watch and appears the Magpies are safe this time as the cuckoos fly off.

We continue further, stretching our legs for a walk into the Magasca plains. A gorgeous Booted Eagle soars above us at the car park. With the sun shining, the butterflies are out, we see Small Copper, Small Heath and Clouded Yellow as we begin walking. Calandra, Thekla and Crested Lark, Corn Bunting and Zitting Cisticola are all singing around us. We see Hoop Petticoat Narcissus growing in the grass along the path. A stunning female Woodchat Shrike poses on a fence, giving us prolonged views. Black and Griffon Vultures fly above and a male Little Bustard is sitting in the distance. After our walk, we drive on to the little town of Santa Marta de Magasca, stopping for morning coffee in the sunshine. We drive on to a parking spot overlooking Rio Tamuja, looking down into the gorge to have lunch. Kate spots Spanish Terrapins on the river edge and Alpine Swifts fly past. The sun is very warm, and the continuous wildlife makes this a 'fabulous spot.' Pallid Swift, Red-rumped Swallow, Nightingale, and Cuckoo are also present. When we look up, there is a constant stream of raptors flying over our heads. Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagle and a very handsome and close Spanish Imperial Eagle. As we finish our lunch a Short-toed Eagle glides overhead and starts displaying. We drag ourselves away and continue up the road.

We are now into a flatter landscape, driving along seeing nest boxes on each telegraph pole, put up by the government for Rollers, Kestrel, Jackdaw and Little Owl. We stop on the plains where a line of Great Bustards fly in behind a pool. Whilst watching, Martin and Kate spot a female Hen Harrier cruising past and across the road. We park at the brow of the hill where two Great Bustards are very close in and Kate spots a group of Black and Griffon Vultures feeding on the ground. We check each nest box as we drive along, when luckily one has a Little Owl sitting very still next to one for us to see.

We drive on, south of Caceres now to an area called Sierra de Mosca, where Martin hopes to show us orchids. This is where trousers would be useful, as we meander through gorse and shrubs. It isn't long until we find our first orchids of the holiday, the Sawfly Orchid. As we walk on we see evidence of Boar digging and a Spanish Festoon butterfly lands in front. We now get to a nice group of Conical, Naked Man and Mirror Orchids which appear to be spread all around. We find the Barbary Nut Iris which uniquely only opens up in the afternoon and

well as an *Ophrys dyris* and Woodcock Orchid. We hear Nuthatch on the walk back, trying hard not to stand on the orchids. A nice way to end the day, as we take the main roads back to our hotel.

Day 4: It's an 'orchid' day today as we head off in duller weather south towards Zafra, passing large agricultural areas of tomato, olive, peach and grape plantations. After nearly a two hour journey we arrive at our destination along an offroad track amongst almond trees. Not knowing what we will find, Martin leads on and gets excited as he starts to see colourful orchids. It is the best display seen for years as we reach the uncultivated area where the ground is a sight of purple and pink with every footstep. The tall Pink Butterfly Orchid catches our eye, but others here include Sombre, Conicle, Naked Man and Champagne. We take in the scale of this flower field, walking slowly being careful where we place our feet. We find a sub species of the Sombre Orchid, the *Ophrys bilunulata*, Martin explains how the rim of yellow is thicker and has flatter petals. We also spot some Pink Butterfly and Champagne orchid hybrids. We spend the next hour taking-in the sheer scale of this area and how many orchids are here. On the way back to the van, Peter picks up a Nosey Cone-headed Grasshopper.

We drive into Zafra for coffee before heading to Alconera, stopping to look at Giant Orchids growing on the edge of the road. We have lunch further up before taking a wander over an old quarry to look for an orchid species which is not here unfortunately, but we do see Hill Orchid beginning to grow. We drive back to the area of Giant Orchids to have a closer look, which have been growing since January, so lucky to still see some in nice condition. A lovely male Linnet sings from a branch, a Wall Brown butterfly lands and Kate spots a Long-horned Bee. After checking a couple more sites for possible orchids, the dark thundery clouds are looming, so we start to drive north again up the motorway to our final stop.

Keeping in mind Peter's 'lifer' bird, the Garganey, Martin has a spot in mind, Canchalejas reservoir. There are Cattle Egrets, Hoopoe and Common Cuckoo calling. After some scanning, Martin shouts 'Garganey.' Two pairs swim out from long grass and join in courtship, Peter is happy to see them. There are Black-winged Stilt, as well as Green Sandpiper and a Spotted Redshank. Scanning the opposite bank behind the Garganey, Kate spots an Iberian Hare with its large ears and pale belly. Two Woodchat Shrike are also being very active as we drive off. Along the road, something catches Kate's eye as she says, 'what's that?' A Red Fox! As we stop to look it stands still watching us before trotting into the trees. Martin also spots a Woodlark along the fence, before continuing back to our hotel. Kate and Peter take a stroll through Madronera before dinner, spotting many nests of House Martins and Swallows as they navigate the small lanes.

Day 5: With winds looking lighter north, we set off getting to our first spot at Arrocampo reservoir by 10am. This reserve has a large area of marsh and reed beds for us to explore. There are Swallows diving under the road bridge and Nightingale singing. There are several birds singing in the warm morning sun as we begin to scan the reeds. A Purple Heron flies past and Martin hears Reed Warbler. A Purple

Swamphen gets closer, exploring reedbeds across from us. Kate spots a Purple Heron hiding in the reeds hunting and we hear Water Rail. We hear a Little Bittern call, before it suddenly sits up on top of the reeds making it very easy to see. We take a walk along the track to another vantage point. There are several Spanish and American Terrapins on the edge of a pool and several vultures and raptors are in the sky. Along the track, a Northern Wheatear appears and Marsh Harrier drifts over the reed bed. Slowly walking back, we stop in for some refreshments before stopping along the road where Martin hopes to show us Savi's Warbler. After briefly hearing its call, one appears and we all get great views, also hearing Kingfisher in this spot.

We continue now to Almaraz, stopping at the Orchydarium which is a great resource to learn more about the orchid species we are looking for this week. The afternoon sunshine is now warming up as we drive up to El Sierro for lunch. Before we can even get out of the van Martin spots our target species, the Yellow Bee Orchid, which was a great find so quickly. We have lunch here, spotting Conical, Woodcock and Naked Man Orchids also. A Booted Eagle glides overhead in perfect light, showing off its 'landing light' patches on its neck base. We stop next beside the road, where Martin spots a big patch of Naked Man Orchid and further along on an area of rough grazing and wild fennel, where large groups of the orchid sit together.

We now head south again through the Miravete tunnel, turning off uphill. It is a bit windy here but we see Blue Rock Thrush sitting and a Woodlark on the fence. The wind picks up, so we head down the valley instead to have a wander. We listen out for woodland species, hearing a brief Crested Tit and Nuthatch. We follow the sound of Short-toed Treecreeper, before Kate spots it flying between the trees. It returns to an old cork tree with a big feather and into a hollowed branch. We stand back and watch it going into its nest hole. Further along we see a Cirl Bunting and Spanish Festoon butterfly. Back at the van Kate spots a Lizard climbing the bridge wall for some sun which after some identification from photos we identify it as a Geniez's Wall Lizard.

Our last stop of the day is into a heath area with white broom and French lavender plants as far as the eye can see, up at the Meseta of Jaraicejo. We stroll through the landscape listening for Warblers. Whilst listening out for a distant Spectacle Warbler, we hear Bee-eaters flying over, eventually seeing them against the blue sky, a flock of around fifty of them high up. Suddenly a Spectacled Warbler perches close by giving us stunning views of this male. Soon a Dartford Warbler is heard and Peter spots it flying into a broom bush, coming back up to pose for us. We stand in the afternoon sun for a while to catch glimpses of both Warbler species before returning back to the hotel for 6pm.

Day 6: A few showers are expected today as we head south again towards Merida. In hope to add the final orchid species to our list today, we first stop at Valverde de Merida to look for our first, the Common Tongue Orchid. Luckily it isn't hard to find and we see great examples, as well as a couple of the Slender Tongue

Orchid. There is also Champagne and Sawfly Orchid, with Spotted Rock Rose also out in flower.

We head south of Merida now onto the Alange reservoir to take a walk. Plenty of Alpine Swifts are flying around the reservoir wall and we get a lovely Rock Bunting from the car park, as well as Kestrel and Griffon Vulture. We scan the water as we walk round, finding Great Crested Grebe, Coot, Greylag and Egyptian goose. A Blue Rock Thrush flies up and sits on a high rock above us as we begin to look for our target species here, the Black Wheatear. There are many Crag Martins nesting in the cliffs, amongst Vulture nests, when a Black Wheatear appears up ahead. It poses long enough to get nice views through the telescope as we edge closer. Sadly, it doesn't reappear, but on our walk back a male Sardinian Warbler poses nicely.

We head into Alange now, to the other side of this cliff to take a walk up towards the ruins of Alange castle for another orchid species. After a steep incline we get spectacular views all around and walk up to a wildflower meadow and Martin promptly finds a couple of perfect Bumblebee Orchids. It is slightly early in the season so we are happy to find them, amongst Yellow Bee and Early Spider orchids too. We watch a close Short-toed Eagle on our return when Martin hears an unexpected bird for this location, a Chough! We watch as it must be nesting near the ruins as it calls right overhead. We head back down now and Martin takes us for lunch in a secret valley, we hopes will earn the 'fabulous spot' title for the day, Jabata Valley. We arrive round the corner to a wildflower meadow where we stop for lunch and Kate can't resist a lay down in them. A stunning Spanish Festoon butterfly poses in the sunshine as we begin a wander up into the heath to look for an orchid species Martin hopes for, though it is early in the season. Some Green Winged Orchids are the first to be spotted. The rain shower doesn't deter us as we get closer to the site and Martin gets a nice surprise when he finds a closed Heart flowered Tongue orchid. Proceeding carefully, we see more and some even with open flowers for us to enjoy. With looming clouds, we wonder back and stop in at Alange for a coffee.

To Merida now through the rain, where it stops in time for us to take a walk along the world's longest Roman Bridge in the centre of the city. There are plenty of Egrets, Herons and Glossy Ibis on the river here, as well as Purple Swamphen. Further along Martin hears Penduline Tit feeding in the reeds and after some looking, he finds the male and we manage to get a look through the telescope. The rain starts again as we begin to leave Merida, so we head north. Stopping at Trujillo's bull ring, we watch out for Lesser Kestrel and get nice views of the Spotless Starling singing from the roof. Martin and his wife Claudia very kindly invite us for tea at their house before dropping us back at the hotel later.

Day 7: Our final day today sadly, but today we head to the highly anticipated Monfrague National Park. The day starts very cool with a touch of frost, as we drive through the dehesa into the national park. As the first stop is busy with people already, we head to the north border to work our way back through the day. We stop

at Portilla del Tietar overlooking the river, where there are high crags of metamorphic rocks to overlook. Griffon Vultures are nesting whilst Black Vultures and Crag Martins fly over and Blue Rock Thrush poses on the top. Whilst standing at the lookout we see Subalpine Warbler, Rock Bunting and Cirl Bunting. It is mesmerising watching the activity of the nests in front of us and Kate spots an Egyptian Vulture flying in, with a pair landing on the cliff in front. Kate notices some Red Deer running through the trees, climbing over the cliffs and Black Kite fly over. A Short-toed Eagle comes into land on the vulture rocks and we get incredibly close views through the telescopes. It hasn't warmed up much yet, but as we walk back to the van, Martin spots a Spanish Imperial Eagle coming overhead and a Nettle-tree butterfly.

We drive down to Hotel Rural Puerta de Monfrague for morning coffee with views looking north to the snow-capped mountains. Driving slowly along the road through a wooded area, Martin is keeping an ear out for Western Orphean Warbler, so we stop to have a look. There are also Rock Sparrows singing from the trees. There is a Woodchat Shrike pair and Common Cuckoo as Martin listens out for the warbler. He sees a Spanish Imperial Eagle not too far away, which begins displaying in the air and calling. Kate eventually finds the Rock Sparrow that is singing from a tree and we get a Western Orphean Warbler.

Lunch now at the Mirador Malavuelta, overlooking the reservoir watching the House Martins flying from the wall and Siskin feeding in the trees. We carry onto the northern boundary of the Park to look for Bonelli's Eagle, but we see Vultures with their chicks on a nearby cliff. We scan slowly on the road back for Black-eared Wheatear, before we stop in at the Villarreal de San Carlos car park to check fence posts. After some scanning, Kate suddenly spots the Wheatear on a signpost, so we walk to the other car park to get closer. The Black-eared Wheatear is feeding on the ground before posing on a post again briefly. Before our final stop for the day, we go for a walk from Fuente del Frances to look for some butterfly species, when an Osprey is a nice surprise as it flies overhead. We see a good number of butterflies, including, Comma, Speckled Wood, Holly Blue, Nettle-tree and Cleopatra walking along the Rio Tajo, where a House Martin city is using the bridge to nest.

Our final stop of the day at the popular spot of Salto del Gitano, where the tall rock formations provide ample space for many nests. This is where we see Black Storks on their nests amongst the Griffon Vultures which fill the sky and rocks around us. It makes for a fantastic place to spend the rest of the day, surrounded by birds in a rugged landscape and to end our birding locations of the trip. We meander back up the hairpin roads ending our day at 6.30pm, where Martin joins us for dinner later on to go over our highlights from the week.

Day 8: It has been a bird and botany filled week here in Extremadura, but we must reluctantly pack up and make our way to the airport. The drive there gives us views of the snow-capped mountains that sit centrally in Spain. With Peter's request, we stop at the monument of the Battle of Talavera, which is on the road back,

in memory of the English, French and Spanish armies who fought in the battle in 1809. Reaching the airport just after midday, we say a fond farewell to Martin who has been a fabulous guide for the week with his extensive knowledge of the area and species.

Of all the bird species, Woodchat Shrike, Black-winged Kite, and Black-eared Wheatear come out as the favourites. For flower species Pink Butterfly Orchid, Iberian Fritillary and the Heart-tongue Orchid were special. With so many 'fabulous spots' explored - Monfrague, the Orchid meadow near Zafra and the Jabata Valley get the title, with the wildflower meadow, mass of Vultures and the interaction between the Great Spotted Cuckoo and Magpies earning our magic moments.

BIRDS

Egyptian Goose
Greylag Goose
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Teal
Garganey
Red-legged Partridge
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Cattle Egret
Grey Heron
Little Egret
Great Egret
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Osprey
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Red Kite
Black Kite
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Black-shouldered Kite
Lesser Kestrel
Common Kestrel
Water Rail (H)
Moorhen
Coot
Purple Swamphen
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Back-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Green Sandpiper
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Little Owl
Scops Owl
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Hoopoe
Bee-eater
Kingfisher
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Short-toed Lark
Calandra Lark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
White Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Robin
Nightingale (H)
Common Redstart
Black Redstart
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackcap
Western Orphean Warbler (H)
Sardinian Warbler
Spectacled Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Chiffchaff
Wren
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit (H)
Long-tailed Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike

Woodchat Shrike
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Chough
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Serin
Cirl Bunting
Corn Bunting
Rock Bunting
Common Waxbill
(138)

MAMMALS

Red Fox
Red Deer
Iberian Hare
Rabbit

Bat species (5)

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Iberian marsh Frog
Spanish Terrapin
Large Psammmodromus
Common Tree Frog
Geniez Wall Lizard

BUTTERFLIES

Spanish Festoon
Small White
Clouded Yellow
Cleopatra
Small Copper
Holly Blue
Nettle-tree Butterfly
Large Tortoiseshell
Comma
Red Admiral
Small Heath
Speckled Wood
Wall Brown
Bath White
Queen of Spain Fritillary

ORCHIDS

Giant
Sombre
Ophrys dyris
Ophrys bilunulata
Bumblebee
Early Spider
Yellow Bee
Woodcock
Mirror
Sawfly
Fan-lipped Hill
Green-winged
Champagne
Pink Butterfly
Conical
Naked Man
Common Tongue
Heart-flowered Tongue
Slender-flowered Tongue