

Holiday Highlights
Spanish Birds and Botany
22 – 29 March 2023

Guides: Kate Mennie and Martin Kelsey

Guests: Helen and Richard Maynard, Mary and David Penton, Stephen Evans

Day 1: After meeting everyone in Gatwick North, we make our way into Departures and it isn't long until we are boarding the plane and on our way to Spain. We have a long walk through Madrid Airport to collect our bags, but then we meet up with our friendly, local guide Martin, who helps us out to the vehicle. We get a little bit of fresh air before we settle in and begin our journey south.

Halfway down the motorway we stop at a service station and are amazed by the number of birds we see already. There are Swallows nesting in the roof of the building and Crested Larks calling from the car park. A Black Vulture flies overhead and a Black-shouldered Kite shows well as it flies around and perches for us to admire. The last part of our journey sees us arriving at our hotel for the week and we have just enough time to get ready before Martin joins us for dinner. We have an early night after a day of travelling.

Day 2: We are staying relatively local today to get used to our surroundings, so head out towards Trujillo. As we park up in the plains of Cerralbos the welcome sound of larks fills the air as we open the doors. Our first Hoopoe is also calling in the distance, not Kate imitating one this time. A Black Vulture takes off from the ground as we get out, showing its massive nine-foot wingspan. From the side of the road we look for Great Bustard on the plains and listen for the call of Sandgrouse. Martin hears our first Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flying close-by and they eventually land on the plains. They are very good at hiding so only their heads show, but you can see them well through the scopes. We continue to scan the plains, where the Crested, Thekla and Calandra lark are singing, as well as Corn Bunting. Martin spots a late winter visitor, a Tawny Pipit feeding on the ground.

We move up the road and drive slowly along a track to a high point to scan. We get a good chance to compare the Thekla and Crested Lark which look very similar, but can be determined by the length of their bill. There are some flowers out despite the dry spring that Spain has had - Eyebright, Spotted Rock Rose and French Lavender. After scanning the plains we make our way back long the track. Two Ravens call and a single Bee-eater is seen flying high up.

We drive into the small village of Santa Marta de Magasca, where a small bar and sunny spot are welcome. With refreshments in hand we all agree it feels like a holiday now! Eager for more birds we drive towards the southern plain, where a young Spanish Imperial Eagle flies off beside the road. Along the side of the road

we keep an eye on the roller nest boxes attached to the telegraph poles, just in case there are any birds nesting in them already. Two Lesser Kestrels catch our eye, so we pull in to have a look. We notice a large flock of Griffon and Black Vultures resting in the field before they all take off and make their way closer to us as they catch the thermals. More raptors like Black Kite and Booted Eagle join too, before we also notice a smaller vulture, the Egyptian.

We head back to the river gorge viewpoint at Rio Tamuja for lunch in the sun. It isn't long until the Imperial Eagle we spotted earlier flies overhead. As we eat lunch we can't help but be distracted to the new world of birdwatching we have found ourselves in. David spots some birds on the opposite side and finds Red-legged Partridges walking through the trees. Kate has a moment of mind block when she spots a surprising mammal down by the river, "a pig, wild goat, a hog..." before Martin helps her out with "a Wild Boar". We listen to the Iberian Marsh Frogs and spot Spanish Terrapins on the water's edge whilst Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallow fly around us. We spot a Hummingbird Hawkmoth feeding on the flowers and Stephen points out a Woodchat Shrike perched on a tree. We park down by the river where David sees Grey and White Wagtail and Roe Deer run across the road.

We drive back to the south plains to have another chance of looking for Bustards. We walk along the road to get better vantage point but unfortunately no Bustards today. A Thekla Lark poses nicely for us and we spot Gadwall on the pond.

Towards Caceres now, where we park up at the side of the road near Sierra de Mosca, where we will take a walk to look for orchids. Crossing the wall into the dehesa, we enjoy a stroll through, keeping our eyes to the ground in search of flora. We see Tassel Hyacinth, Broom Rake and Sage Leaved Cistus. Martin spots the first orchid for the trip, the Sawfly Orchid and then a very tall Woodcock. As we keep our eyes to the ground we spot a Red Striped Oil Beetle scurrying under the bushes. As Martin and David look at a Green Hairstreak butterfly, Kate spots our target orchid. A nice example of the Sombre (*ophrys dyris*) and more found as we scan this area. On our walk back down, we also see Conical and Champagne Orchid.

We drive to Trujillo to get some supplies, whilst most of the group walk down to the bullring where a tall bird hide is positioned overlooking the building. This is where a large population of Lesser Kestrel breed, so a perfect spot to end the day watching them fly around.

Day 3: A duller day today, so we head towards Zafra to focus on orchids. We take a back road through Santa Cruz towards the motorway, seeing Iberian Grey Shrike on the way. After making our way south, we turn off the road and take a small bumpy road through olive and almond plantations before stopping and stretching our legs.

We walk into the area of rough pasture to look for orchids and Kate is already excited as she spots pink flowers! We see the first of our orchid species, the Pink Butterfly and then the Naked Man and Sawfly. We take this time to wander through the pasture looking at the many species here, including Champagne/pink butterfly hybrids. Martin finds a great example of what we are here to look for, side by side comparison of the sombre orchids – *Ophrys fusa* and *Ophrys bilunulata*, noticing the wide yellow band round the *bilunulata* variant. A few careful steps through the meadow and Martin gasps in excitement at finding a Giant Orchid, not found on this site before. It is a fine example and a great surprise. We continue to walk through the meadow immersing ourselves in orchids, before making our way back. David has been watching birds and managed to see a Common Redstart and Stonechat.

We continue down the track again and along to Zafra for a comfort stop. We head out of the town and up a road to a great vantage point for lunch in the sunshine. There are Serin and Thekla lark singing and Kate spots a Cirl Bunting on a tree, when a Scarce Swallowtail butterfly also flies past. Martin leads us into the trees to look for Hill Orchid. There are plenty of Mirror Orchid but unfortunately the Hill Orchids are past their best this time. Mary spots a Brimstone moth and a Common Swallowtail. We go back down the track to look at the remaining Giant Orchids that have been in bloom since January, spotting a Spanish Festoon butterfly in amongst them.

We start our journey north again, taking a road near Merida to a lagoon called Esparragalejo for some birdwatching to please David. There are plenty of birds here today, so we enjoy some time here watching Sand Martins flying around and Glossy Ibis. On the water's edge Little Ringed Plovers are calling and Iberian Yellow Wagtail. Martin points out a Water Pipit, a first for a few of us. On the water, Shoveler, Black-winged Stilt, Little Stints and Cattle Egret are resting. A Marsh Harrier flies over sending everything into the air. We enjoy our bit of birding before heading back to the hotel.

Before dinner, we do our checklist and head into the park across the road for dusk, in the hope of catching a glimpse of Scops Owl. The park is still full of children playing, so we walk around for a while scanning the trees and listening out for their call. As Kate plays the example call of the Scops Owl we walk back towards the gates, then Kate hears a call from a bare tree across the park. She spots its silhouette against the dusk sky and we all manage to see a Scops Owl sitting and hopping onto different branches. A second bird flies in with it, before they both go separate ways and we get views of them flying. A fantastic sighting to end the day.

Day 4: A local day, as we set off towards Zorita. We get onto the plains where the mist rolls in, but we can still see okay and it isn't long until we spot our target bird, the Great Bustard. We watch it for a while in hope it becomes easier to see or it starts displaying, but the mist stays in the way. We hear Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but decide to let the mist clear so head towards a local river. As we

drive Martin spots a Great Spotted Cuckoo, but unfortunately there is a car behind us so we cannot stop.

We take a small road past farmland and stop at the edge of a field. There are Cuckoo and Cetti's Warbler calling beside us and we hear a flock of Collared Pratincole as they catch flies above our heads. Further along we get closer views of the Pratincoles and a Hoopoe sitting on the road, giving us a good view. We get to the Rio Rucus, for a different environment. Cetti's Warbler are singing loudly and Chiffchaff are hopping through the reeds. In a flash we see Water Rail and Kingfisher darting downstream. It is a very peaceful and wildlife abundant environment and Martin quickly spots two Waxbills camouflaged in the reeds. As we walk back to the van we can hear a displaying Marsh Harrier, we spot above the trees as it climbs and falls in the sky.

We return to the plains, where we get close to two Great Bustards strutting their stuff through the plains in front. Although not displaying we get a nice clear view of them in the sunshine. We carry on this road to keep scanning, spotting a Western Psammodromus at the side of the road. There is a Short-toed Eagle perched on a pylon and Kate sees a Little Owl on top of a nest box. We slowly make our way down the hill, stopping for a coffee surrounded by Swallow and House Martins nesting.

We head back to the hotel and have our lunch in the village park, before meeting Mary and David and heading out for the afternoon.

Heading back to Zorita, we arrive at the Plesa de Alcollarin where the blue skies and calm water are welcome. This is a relatively new reservoir, which is teeming with wildlife. Plenty of Great Crested Grebe, Tufted Duck, Cormorant and hear Bee-eaters fly overhead. Along the track there are Spoonbill and Great Egrets wading on the edge of the water. We park up at the end where there is a lagoon full of Vagrant Emperor Dragonflies, which prove difficult to photograph! There are plenty of birds to watch too including Egrets, Marsh Harrier and a singing Nightingale.

After spending a bit of time here, we drive along the track on the west site of the reservoir. There are Wigeon, Mallard and Lapwing on the far bank. Martin spots a Greenshank on our side and directs us to it, when suddenly an Otter pops out of the water to our amazement. We watch it for a while as it dips in and out of the water, gradually heading towards us. We mention how it would be great if it came on the peninsula and it does! It climbs over a rock before going back into the water.

Still in hope of finding Helen's target bird, the Bee-eater we drive back along the track. Kate asks to stop and straight away hears Bee-eaters overhead. As we get out around fifty fly close and a few land in some nearby trees. They pose perfectly for a few minutes for us all to enjoy their vibrant colours through the telescopes.

We now make our way to the other side of the reservoir, spotting Painting Lady butterfly on the track. We take a walk down to the waters edge to get closer and are greeted by a Black Kite sitting on a rock, Red Crested Pochard and Pintail on the water. On the shore, Glossy Ibis are wading and Kate spots a juvenile Common Crane. Happy with our day's sightings, we make our way back to the hotel to enjoy another meal.

Day 5: With the clocks changing overnight we all take a little longer to get up this morning, but after breakfast we get on our way, enjoying a longer journey south to wake ourselves up. Driving through the mist and past the 'giant tomato' we reach our first stop at Valverde de Merida to look for orchids. Across the road we look in an area of grass where we find Champagne Orchid and Martin finds our first Tongue Orchids. They are quite short, possibly due to the colder spring this year, but we find a good patch that we can look at closely. We also find an example of the Slender Tongue orchid (*serapias parviflora*) and Martin describes its features.

We continue now to Alange Reservoir for some bird watching and a wonder. A surprise Cetti's Warbler is singing loudly as we arrive and Alpine Swift are nesting under the bridge. Above the rock formation, Griffon and Black Vulture and Black Kite flocks are on migration. Both a Rock Bunting and Serin pose for us along the track. Kate soon spots a Blue Rock Thrush singing from the rocks above us, where Crag Martins are nesting. We hope to find Black Wheatear here, so we continue to a well-known rock for them. With a bit of luck, there is one on the rock and we manage to get views through the scope before it flies away. We try to relocate it, but it must be off feeding.

We enjoy a slow walk back, with the cliffs to one side and still water of the reservoir. Making our way in the village of Alange now for a refreshment break, we try and find a place to park for our next walk. Unsuccessful and hungry we change our plans and head into Jabota valley, a lovely quiet spot for lunch. We briefly see a Golden Eagle over the ridge and sit amongst the wildflowers. We then go for a butterfly wander, seeing Lang's short-tailed Blue, then Mary spots a Spanish Festoon. Along with Champagne Orchid, Martin finds the Green-winged Orchid, whilst he runs up the hill to see if the Heart-flowered Orchid is out, which unfortunately it isn't yet. We admire the fritillaries out in flower and French Lavender. At the vans, Stephen spots a Sardinian Warbler in the tree and Thekla lark singing, which David manages to get a photo of.

Back in Alange now, we manage to park in the square and prepare for a walk. Most of us begin the ascent up the rocky path, before Kate and David stop at the viewpoint where the views north are breath-taking. The others carry on and successfully find the Early Spider and Bumblebee Orchids nestled at the bottom of the castle ruins and see a Swallowtail butterfly.

We all meet up again and have a sweet treat before continuing our journey to Merida. We walk along the Rio Guadiana which separates the old town Merida

to the new town, before stepping onto the 200 year old roman bridge. It's very quiet today, but we enjoy seeing this piece of history and do a spot of birdwatching before eventually walking back and drive home to the hotel.

Day 6: Stephen and Mary are woken up by the sound of Scops Owl this morning calling from outside their bedrooms. After breakfast we head off, first to Trujillo to the plains of Beten where we hope to see some more Great Bustards. We take our time scanning the various plains and take a small track where a female Hen Harrier dashes out of the grass. Kate spots Bustards in the distance and we walk to the top of the track to get a better view. There are eight Great Bustard males strutting around, when suddenly they dash across the field where a female is waiting. Through the scope we watch the males attempting to impress her, one or two of the males going into their foam dance position, fluffing up their feathers. It is great to get such good views of a flock displaying.

We continue north, to Almaraz, stopping near the Arracampo Reserve. We have our refreshment break, before walking onto the reserve looking over marshland. There is a large area of reedbeds here to scan for Little Bittern. We do find a couple of Night Heron perched in nearby trees and hear a Swamphen. A Purple Heron and a Purple Swamphen are visible for a moment. Walking along the track, there is an Iberian Grey Shrike and Martin spots a couple of Gull Billed Tern flying.

At the next hide, the ramp gives us a good vantage point, where we see Spoonbill sleeping on top of the reeds, plus Marsh Harrier and we get closer to the terns. Stephen spots a Hoopoe on a wall and we hear Reed Warbler.

We have lunch back at the van, whilst looking for Little Bittern. Kate spots a Dragonfly on a blade of grass, so we move it before it gets stood on. We drive along the road, for a chance of seeing Savi's Warbler, Martin spots a Northern Branded groundling dragonfly.

After a comfort stop, we drive south and stop in an area of heath of white broom and French Lavender at Jaraicejo. From here we hope to find some warblers, so go on a walk through this area. There is a single Pink Butterfly Orchid and Martin sees a brief Dartford Warbler. Even though we can hear them, they are hiding well today, getting glimpses as we walk along. We enjoy the sweet aroma of the lavender and find an abundance of Hoop Petticoat narcissus. Mary spots a Swallowtail butterfly and a Small Copper. Some Red Deer jump through the bushes beside us and we reach the track again.

Our last stop of the day is the idyllic Rio Almonte 'three bridges' viewpoint. The shelter is perfect for a bit of shade from the strong sun and the rustling of Kate's sweet bag is welcome. We spend about an hour here enjoying the views and relaxing setting, doing some birdwatching, looking closely at the iris in flower and watching for Marsh Frogs. A nice way to spend the afternoon in the sun and a perfect spot according to Mary for a steak dinner and wine!

Unfortunately, Martin couldn't arrange the white tablecloth down by the river, but back at the hotel steak is on the menu. Before dinner Kate and a few of us take a walk through the streets of the town seeing nesting House Martins and White Stork nesting on the old chapel. We enjoy a drink under the citrus trees in the garden to do checklist.

Day 7: We head off towards Monfrague National Park today for our final full day. Taking a small road north, we drive through some beautiful dehesa landscape of Holm Oak and Cork trees.

We get to the north part of the park stopping at the Portilla del Teitar viewpoint. The first of the large rock formations we will see today has everyone is awe and it is full of breeding birds. It isn't long until Martin finds a fabulous Eagle Owl sitting on its nest nestled between the rocks. Our sound must be carrying as it sits up and faces us, giving great prolonged views of its large eyes and tufted ears. There are many Griffon vultures flying around, on nests or observing from a high rock. We hear a Blue Rock Thrush singing, perched on a high rock. On our way back to the van a Rock Bunting lands close for us to see and a Subalpine Warbler pair call and sit on a tree where we can see them.

We have refreshments sitting out in the morning sun, listening out for Western Orphean Warbler and Martin shows us the hollow trunks of the Cork trees. We park a little up the road where a dozen Azure-winged Magpie catch our attention. David spots a Great Spotted Woodpecker on a tree and we listen out carefully for any warblers that may be close-by.

We drive further into the park now, through the Pine forest to the Mirador la Tajadilla view spot, where Martin quickly hears a Hawfinch. Feeding in the Elm tree above us, two Hawfinch are feasting on the seeds and we get great views. We sit here to have our lunch, watching the Hawfinch and Siskin in the trees and a Black Kite on its nest. Stephen sees an Egyptian Vulture, which we later see above the ridge. Although busy with visitors, this is a nice spot for our lunch.

We all get back in the van and barely get a hundred yards when Martin spots our next target bird, the Black-eared Wheatear. We park and enjoy views of it going from tree to post. They are a very striking wheatear, which is enjoyed by many. We decide that a refreshment treat will be nice on this warm day, so we stop at the nearest village for an ice cream, which is most welcome by everyone.

Ready for a walk, we park at the Fuente del Frances along the river to look for butterflies that may be out enjoying the sun. There are a few Speckled Wood, Small Heath and Holly Blue. The noise of hundreds of House Martin nesting under the bridge is deafening as they fly above our heads. Stephen spots a Geniez's Wall Lizard creep underneath the bench, doing its best to stay camouflaged. Back at the van a Nettle-tree butterfly poses nicely on the branches of the tree.

We carry on to the final spectacle on our Monfrague adventure, the Salto del Gitano. A lark rock formation over the river, which is a nesting place for dozens of birds like Griffon Vulture and Black Stork. After scanning the rocks it isn't long until we find a Black Stork on its nest. As we wait for the busy school group to leave we admire the birds here and see two Blue Rock Thrush fighting below us. The Red-rumped Swallow perch on branches and the sun is hitting their vibrant colours, so that we can admire them. We stay for a while as everyone seems happy to enjoy the spectacle and warm sunshine before we drag ourselves away and enjoy the sights on the drive out.

Back at the hotel we all enjoy a drink and snacks sitting in the garden and decide it is the perfect opportunity to go over our holiday highlights.

Day 8: After breakfast, we reluctantly leave promptly and say 'adios' to Madronera as we head north towards Madrid. We still have some wildlife watching to do and stop at Almaraz to look for some more orchids. The Lynx road signs are flashing, so in anticipation there may be one around we keep our eyes peeled. Arriving at the orchid patch there is a good show of the Naked Man Orchid and further up the hill we wander around, where Kate spots the Yellow Bumblebee Orchid. We are glad to see it in flower and see many more orchid species in this spot. With a bit more time, we return to Arracampo Reserve to have another go at finding Little Bittern, but unfortunately it does not show.

We carry on up the motorway, stopping at a service station to talk through Martin highlights from the week with us and have our lunch overlooking the fields. Martin spots a juvenile Imperial Eagle soar over our heads as we soak up the sun.

We must drive on now, reaching a busy Madrid airport and saying our farewells to Martin who has been a fantastic local guide for the week. We all get to London, where we say farewell to each other. Thank you for a memorable week in Spain's Extremadura, with lots of wildlife and orchids seen.

Holiday Highlights

Species of the Trip:

Richard – Great Bustard
Helen – Eagle Owl
Mary – Great Bustard
David – Great Bustard
Stephen – Black-shouldered Kite
Kate – Bee-eater
Martin – Marsh Harrier

Place of the trip:

Richard – Monfrague
Helen – Monfrague
Mary – Alange viewpoint
David – Monfrague
Stephen – Rio Almonte '3 bridges'
Kate – Presa de Alcollarin
Martin – Alange meadow

Magic Moment:

Richard – Otter
Helen – Otter
Mary – Seeing the Pink Butterfly Orchid
David – Eagle Owl on nest
Stephen – Otter
Kate – Otter
Martin – Unexpected Giant Orchid

BIRDS

Egyptian Goose
Greylag Goose
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Teal
Garganey
Red Crested Pochard
Tufted Duck
Pintail
Wigeon
Red-legged Partridge
Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Black-crowned Night Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Common Crane
Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Golden Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Red Kite
Black Kite
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Black-shoulder Kite
Lesser Kestrel
Common Kestrel
Water rail
Moorhen
Coot
Purple Swamphen
Great Bustard
Collared Pratincole
Black-winged Stilt
Little Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Greenshank
Spotted Redshank
Ruff
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed gull

Gull-billed Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Scope Owl
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark (H)
Short-toed Lark
Calandra Lark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Water Pipit
Meadow Pipit
White Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Robin
Nightingale (H)
Common Redstart
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackcap
Western Orphean Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Spectacled Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler (H)
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler (H)
Chiffchaff
Wren
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Nuthatch (H)

Short-toed Treecreeper (H)
Iberian Grey Shrike
Woodchat Strike
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Chough (H)
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Serin
Hawfinch
Cirl Bunting
Corn Bunting
Rock Bunting
Bee Eater
(141)

MAMMALS

Red Deer
Wild Boar
Rabbit
Roe Deer
Otter

REPTILES AND OTHER

Iberian Marsh Frog
Spanish Terrapin
Large Psammodromus
Western Psammodromus
Geniez's Wall Lizard
Vagrant emperor Dragonfly
Northern Branded Grounding
Dragonfly

BUTTERFLIES

Swallowtail
Spanish Festoon
Small White
Clouded Yellow
Green Hairstreak
Small Copper
Holly Blue
Nettle-tree Butterfly
Large Tortoiseshell
Painted Lady
Small Heath
Speckled Wood
Bath White
Scarce Swallowtail
Langs short-tailed Blue

ORCHIDS

Giant Orchid

Sombre Orchid

Bumblebee Orchid

Early Spider Orchid

Yellow Bee Orchid

Woodcock Orchid

Mirror Orchid

Sawfly Orchid

Fan-lipped (Hill) Orchid

Green-winged Orchid

Champagne Orchid

Pink Butterfly Orchid

Conical Orchid

Naked Man Orchid

Tongue Orchid

Ophrys Dyris

Ophrys Bilunulata

Serapias Parviflora (Slender Tongue Orchid)