

EXTREMADURA MAY 2008

Trip Report

Saturday 24 May

Our arrival at Madrid Airport at around 1pm was greeted by the sun breaking through a largely cloudy sky and a rather cool afternoon temperature of 15^o C. Little did we realise that this was the last week of the coolest and wettest May experienced in Spain for about 35 years.

Having successfully negotiated the motorway network we soon found ourselves heading south-west on the A5 and the **White Storks** nesting on almost every possible rooftop, the frequent flocks of **Spotless Starling** and the ubiquitous **Black Kites** served to



Griffon Vulture

remind us that we were again returning to the Extremadura. As we continued along the A5 we were distracted by the occasional **Cattle Egret** flying over the road, then a **Booted Eagle**, the first of many and then several **Griffon Vultures**.

We broke our journey from Madrid to Trujillo at Arrocampo, a wetland bird reserve close to the Power Station at Almaraz. Within minutes of parking the car we were watching male and female **Little Bitterns** flying over the reedbeds, occasionally crossing the road and were listening to both **Great Reed Warbler** and **Savi's Warbler** in full song. Several minutes later we had picked out two **Purple Gallinules** partly concealed in the reeds and a **Purple Heron** passed close by. Added to this were two **Marsh Harriers**, a large mixed flock of Little and Cattle Egrets, a **Woodchat Shrike**, several **Crested Larks**, our first **Bee-eater** of the trip, a **Zitting Cisticola** calling constantly as it flew towards us and a well concealed **Cetti's Warbler** that burst into song. The White Stork nests here were mainly built on electricity pylons and each had a brood of well-fledged youngsters.

Upon our arrival at Viñas los Torres, a small family run hotel close to Trujillo, we were met not only by our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen, but also by a family of **Azure-winged Magpies** who were noisily flying around the hotel garden. A **Nightingale** was singing constantly from cover, as were the many **Serins** in the trees and a small party of Bee-eaters hunted overhead. Later into the evening a **Hoopoe** crossed the field outside the hotel and a **Common Buzzard** and Griffon Vulture both flew over, presumably to roost for the night. Finally after dark we heard our one and only **Scop's Owl** calling from woodland behind the hotel.

Sunday 25 May

We woke early on the Sunday morning and before breakfast walked through the farmland surrounding the hotel. Hoopoes were calling everywhere and we saw twos and threes together seemingly still competing for mates. A recently fledged **Sardinian Warbler** was being watched over by an adult and both Woodchat and **Southern Grey Shrikes** were present on wires and in the hedges.

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The forecast was for a cool day with a high chance of rain so we decided remain fairly close to Trujillo and set off to explore the steppes to the west of the town. Before we had travelled more than 5 km from the hotel we noticed a small pool in a field beside the road and a lay-by close to it. Our intended 2 minute stop lasted nearly twenty minutes as not only was the weather dry, but there was a **Black-winged Stilt** on the edge of the pool, a small party of **Red-rumped Swallows** feeding overhead and several **Great Spotted Cuckoos** and a **Common Cuckoo** flying around. A pair of **Little Grebes** was also present in the pool.



Southern Grey Shrike

Fortunately the rain continued to hold off and soon after taking the road from Trujillo to Santa Marta de Magasca we were scanning the open steppes. **Thekla Lark**, **Calandra Lark** and several **Short-toed Larks** were all watched at close quarters after we left the tarmac road and followed one of the tracks. Then we came across a large flock of fifty or more Griffon Vultures fighting over a carcass, amongst them were two or three **Black Vultures**. Further along the track we came across our first two **Great Bustards** and a solitary **Little Bustard** flew overhead.

As we drove on to Sta. Marta we came across very large mixed flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** and **House Sparrows** and both Hoopoes and Bee-eaters became more common. Beyond Sta. Mata on the road to Monroy we stopped above the bridge crossing the Rio Magasca and saw a **Kingfisher** darting upstream whilst both Red-rumped Swallows and **Crag Martins** hawked for insects up and downstream of the bridge. A **Woodlark** was singing continuously and there was a pair of **White Wagtails** moving from rock to rock in search of food. Finally just before we left a **Black Stork** lifted from a concealed position and flew over our heads, a very rewarding 15 minutes or so.

Soon after we approached the junction with the minor road between Trujillo and Monroy, where large numbers of **Montagu's Harriers** are known to congregate and today was no exception as we must have seen eight or more in the space of 5 minutes. We continued towards Monroy as far as the bridge crossing the Rio Almonte where again Crag Martins were busily feeding over the river. We had hoped to catch sight of the elusive Black Wheatears that nest close to the bridge but were not successful. Instead we were rewarded by a further two Black Storks flying upstream, a Booted Eagle hunting overhead, several **Girl Buntings**, a **Blue Rock Thrush** periodically bursting into song and unusually a **Reed Warbler** singing from a patch of broom scrub. Then as we were about to leave our attention was drawn to another fairly large bird of prey drifting towards us then circling overhead. We soon recognised from the distinctive underwing markings and small white patch on its mantle that we were watching an adult **Bonelli's Eagle**, one of the scarcer European eagles.

Our return to Trujillo was delayed by frequent stops to admire the many Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes occupying roadside perches then a **Black-winged Kite** settled

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for some 10 minutes on a dead tree feeding on a small mammal. This prolonged view was a rare treat as this can be an elusive species in the spring. Finally before arriving in Trujillo, we managed to obtain sufficiently prolonged views of one of the many Kestrels to confirm that it was indeed a male **Lesser Kestrel**. On the outskirts of Trujillo we saw our first **Red Kite** of the week and a **Short-toed Eagle** perched on a pylon, the Red Kites seemed to be greatly outnumbered by the blacks at this time of year. We needn't have worried about seeing the kestrel too well however as the town centre was alive with them. These, along with the White Storks nesting on the rooftops of the many historic buildings make Trujillo a remarkable place where people and birds co-existing together happily. After a satisfying dinner we returned to the hotel with just enough energy left to check out the hissing calls from the old farmhouses opposite, where two **Barn Owls** were sitting on the roof and a **Tawny Owl** flew over the hotel towards the woodland behind.

Monday 26th May

Following Juan Pedro's advice we set off to explore the area between Zorita and Madrigalejo in particular the Embalse de Sierra Brava and nearby rice fields. Again we found our journey was frequently interrupted by stops to check out the many birds of prey, the total number of birds occupying the Extremadura at this time of year is quite staggering. Then we saw the first of many **Rollers** perched on roadside wires, gates and fences, occasionally with a flash of colour diving into the fields below to catch prey.



Driving down from the reservoir to the rice fields we saw a Little Bittern flying into an area of reed and all around there were calls from Cetti's Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas and Great Reed Warblers. On several of the flooded fields Black-winged Stilts had gathered and on one, where we stopped for our lunch they had been joined by a **Green Sandpiper** and more than 30 **Gull-billed Terns** continually hawking for insects over the water. We then noticed two smaller, darker terns amongst them, these

being **Black Terns** in breeding plumage. As we were watching these, our attention was drawn to 3 other tern-like birds that flew towards us then over our heads, their plumage was quite different and they were in fact waders who's reddish-brown underwings gave them away as **Collared Pratincoles**. A further two pratincoles followed the other three some minutes later. Finally a flock of locally scarce **Black-headed Gulls** added another species to our holiday list.

In the afternoon we arrived at the Belen Plain close to Trujillo and enjoyed stunning views of at least five male Great Bustards, one strutting around with his tail fanned out. Little Bustards were calling from the long grass, but none made an appearance. A chance meeting with an English couple who had recently moved to the Extremadura provided us with some additional site information and our only sightings of **Stone Curlew**, which would have been virtually impossible to find without the 'insider knowledge'. We decided to return to Belen at dusk as we were informed that the edge of the village was a known area for Red-necked Nightjars. Prior to that we returned to the steppes between Trujillo and Monroy and dodging the showers enjoyed an evening picnic in the company of more than 20 Great Spotted Cuckoos, both adults and juveniles, Little Bustards, again calling but not appearing, **Little Owl** and a flock of 12 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**. We returned to Belen as dusk turned into night and played a CD recording of the call of the **Red-necked Nightjar** only to have it answered by a bird

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not too far away. Unfortunately despite waiting for a further 30 minutes or so as the night-time temperature fell to around 10°C there was no further sight or sound.

Tuesday 27th May

Again the morning began cool but this didn't deter the Hoopoes that were calling continuously, as was the resident Nightingale, and the occasional Bee-eater flew overhead. A pre-breakfast walk in the grounds also produced two **Hawfinches** perched in the open on the garden fence then up into a tree top. After breakfast we travelled to the town of Montanchez following up the information received yesterday and walked up to 'el Castillo' overlooking the town. Here, in the light rain, we were treated to prolonged views of a pair of **Black Wheatears** with a pair of **Black Redstarts** close by. As the rain eased off we walked around the castle and looking out from the walls heard several **Golden Orioles** calling from the trees below. Also a **Honey Buzzard** appeared and circled overhead before drifting away then we watched a Booted Eagle then Short-toed Eagle both apparently encouraged by the lifting cloud. The castle walls were brought to life by a noisy family of Blue Rock Thrushes and numerous Crag Martins and as we were leaving a **Grey Wagtail** flew over. We left Montanchez in the direction of Cáceres then back towards Trujillo taking a minor road north to Sta. Marta de Magasca. We soon encountered the typical steppe species again with Montagu's Harriers becoming frequent and a flock of six male Great Bustards flying close to the road. Rollers were again more regularly seen, including one perched at the entrance of a nest box that had been provided for the purpose. On our return route towards Trujillo we saw our one and only **Black-eared Wheatear** of the week, a stunning male perched on a fence post and singing occasionally.

Wednesday 28th May

The day began with persistent rain but the forecast was for a drier day so we decided we could no longer delay our visit to Montfrague. We had made the right decision and by the time we stopped at the bridge crossing the Rio Almonte the sun was breaking through and the Black Kites that had suddenly appeared were joined by a pair of Short-toed Eagles and a **Rock Sparrow** was watched fleetingly before it disappeared into a riverside tree. Our next stop was at the viewpoint across to Peña Falcon where we saw **Egyptian Vultures** circling in a flock of around 15-20 birds of prey, mainly Griffon Vultures but with the occasional Black Vulture too. Where else in Europe we wondered



Black Vulture

could you experience such a scene? Black Storks were also nesting on the cliffs at Peña Falcon and we could see at least three occupied nests. Flocks of Swifts flew overhead including at least 30 **Alpine Swifts**, but no sign of the much rarer White-rumped Swifts that are occasionally seen here. Blue Rock Thrushes, Black Redstarts and **Rock Buntings** were all occupying territories close to us and the cliffs were alive with their songs. Finally to add to the excitement a further four birds of prey joined the circling vultures

and their size and shape distinguished them as large eagles. After some minutes one of the four dropped down and settled in trees on the far bank and we were able to confirm it was a **Spanish Imperial Eagle**. In the afternoon we drove on to cliffs at Tiertar where there were more nesting Black Storks and Blue Rock Thrushes accompanying the ever present Griffon Vultures. Eventually after an hour or so of careful scanning we found two recently fledged **Eagle Owls** perched on a ledge whilst overhead a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles were displaying for some time before eventually landing amongst trees

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on the far hillside. Also nearby we heard more Golden Orioles in song and we finally caught sight of a female before it disappeared into the canopy of a tree.

Thursday 29th May

We decided to return to Montfrague for a final time and the weather showed signs of improving at last. A walk up to 'El Castillo de Montfrague' was rewarding not only for the close encounters with vultures and kites, that seem drawn to the tower out of curiosity, but also we came across an **Oscillated Lizard**, our only lizard of the week, a family of **Subalpine Warblers** and a **Short-toed Treecreeper**. During our climb up to the tower



Oscillated Lizard

we stopped to enjoy close views of Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows, both collecting mud from pools in order to construct their nests. Another sign perhaps of a spring delayed by

the cool, unsettled weather. Returning from Montfrague along the EX390 from Torrejón el Rubio towards Monroy we were pleased to see that the much publicised Spanish Imperial Eagle nest, on a pylon close to the road, was occupied this year. Our drive back from Monroy to Trujillo produced a further new species of bird of prey, an adult **Golden Eagle** circling over the then sunny steppe. Finally our return to the hotel was greeted by a Raven and Booted Eagle flying over the garden.

Friday 30th May

Our last day and journey to the airport was dogged by frequent showers so we decided to return via Arrocampo where we knew there were bird hides to provide some shelter. The great variety of wetland birds seemed unconcerned by the wet weather, indeed the Great Reed Warblers seemed noisier than ever. Both Little Bittern and Purple Heron were again often flying around and still causing us excitement, then we saw our first **Sand Martins** of the trip, birds that caused less of a stir because they are often seen at home. Similarly a pair of **Little Terns** and a late migrant **Whimbrel** were 'firsts' for the holiday, but they too occur in the UK. Just before we left Arrocampo though another species of water-bird the **Black-crowned Night Heron** made an appearance, three in fact roosting amongst the reeds then occasionally flying from one area of reeds to another. These along with our second Black-winged Kite near Oropesa provided us with a fond farewell until the next time, Hasta luego.



Red-rumped Swallow

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Bird list

Little Grebe	Woodpigeon	Blue Tit
Great Crested Grebe	Collared Dove	Great Tit
Cormorant	Turtle Dove	Short-toed Treecreeper
Little Bittern	Great Spotted Cuckoo	Golden Oriole
Night Heron	Common Cuckoo	Southern Grey Shrike
Cattle Egret	Barn Owl	Woodchat Shrike
Little Egret	Scop's Owl	Jay
Grey Heron	Eagle Owl	Azure-winged Magpie
Purple Heron	Little Owl	Magpie
Black Stork	Tawny Owl	Jackdaw
White Stork	Red-necked Nightjar	Carrion Crow
Mallard	Alpine Swift	Raven
Honey Buzzard	Swift	Spotless Starling
Black-winged Kite	Kingfisher	House Sparrow
Black Kite	Bee-eater	Spanish Sparrow
Red Kite	Roller	Tree Sparrow
Egyptian Vulture	Hoopoe	Rock Sparrow
Griffon Vulture	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Chaffinch
Black Vulture	Lesser Spotted	Serin
Short-toed Eagle	Woodpecker	Greenfinch
Marsh Harrier	Calandra Lark	Goldfinch
Montagu's Harrier	Short-toed Lark	Linnet
Common Buzzard	Crested Lark	Hawfinch
Spanish Imperial Eagle	Thekla Lark	Cirl Bunting
Golden Eagle	Woodlark	Rock Bunting
Booted Eagle	Sand Martin	Corn Bunting
Bonelli's Eagle	Crag Martin	
Lesser Kestrel	Barn Swallow	
Kestrel	Red-rumped Swallow	
Red-legged Partridge	House Martin	
Water Rail	Grey Wagtail	
Moorhen	White Wagtail	
Purple Gallinule	Nightingale	
Coot	Black Redstart	
Little Bustard	Stonechat	
Great Bustard	Black-eared Wheatear	
Black-winged Stilt	Black Wheatear	
Whimbrel	Blue Rock Thrush	
Green Sandpiper	Blackbird	
Stone Curlew	Mistle Thrush	
Collared Pratincole	Cetti's Warbler	
Black-headed Gull	Zitting Cisticola	
Gull-billed Tern	Savi's Warbler	
Little Tern	Reed Warbler	
Black Tern	Great Reed Warbler	
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Subalpine Warbler	
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	Sardinian Warbler	