

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 28 December 2011



Bluethroat



Griffon Vultures



Common Cranes



Griffon Vulture and Spanish Imperial Eagle

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Day 1

Thursday 22nd December

Sunny and mild

Having boarded our morning flight from London, we arrived in sunny Madrid and made our way through the modern, maze-like airport building and after waiting 45 minutes for our baggage we picked up our mini buses and drove west. We made our way through the vast Spanish agricultural landscape before entering the rolling dehesa of Extremadura as the light was quickly dwindling by late afternoon. We pulled off the main road to explore a small valley about 45km from our hotel, lit by the setting evening sun. We found Azure-winged Magpie, Corn Bunting, Sardinian Warbler and Spotless Starling. Roe and Fallow Deer grazed under the Holm Oaks. As the sun started to set we positioned ourselves in a rocky gorge observing a number of Griffon Vultures coming into roost on the crags and nearby trees allowing us to appreciate their huge size. We heard the distinctive hooting of an Eagle Owl on the crags, but persistent searching couldn't locate the culprit as the days light disappeared. As darkness quickly descended we moved on to our comfortable hotel to enjoy a traditional meal, wine and a roaring log fire.

Day 2

Friday 23rd December

Cool, foggy start and sunny, cool afternoon

A positive weather forecast and a bright, sunny morning greeted us on our first full day in Extremadura, so after breakfast we headed north en-route to Monfragüe National Park.

The journey took us through rolling dehesa which was full of winter bird life. Parties of Azure-winged Magpies were evident as were the Iberian Grey Shrike on the roadside wires. A stop at the Rio Almonte added Blue Rock Thrush, Hoopoe and Green Sandpiper. We headed further north towards the national park, but thick mist started to engulf us which didn't bode well for the rest of the morning.

Arriving at the Pennfalcon Rock in Monfragüe we were still surrounded by thick mist, but we still managed to find Griffon Vultures perched close to the road, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and an obliging Short-toed Treecreeper imitating a Wallcreeper as it fed on the granite boulders. We hoped we could climb out of the mist, so headed towards the castle where the air temperature warmed up, but the thick mist prevented us from enjoying the spectacular views that we should have gained. We then enjoyed a picnic lunch below the castle before cutting our losses in the mist and heading towards the rolling plains near Trujillo.

For the afternoon we headed to Belen plain, escaping the thick mist in to bright sunshine and observing a couple of hundred Common Crane feeding on acorns in the dehesa en-route. As we approached the plains, two huge Black Vultures were circling above and Red Kites patrolled the roadside fields. We drove the rough road across the steppe finding Crested, Sky and Calandra Larks along with Spanish Sparrow and hundreds of Corn Buntings. Persistent scanning of this vast landscape paid off with us locating a flock of 18 feeding Great Bustards and observing a flock of Little Bustards in flight.

Day 3

Saturday 24th December

Misty cold start, with mild and sunny afternoon

Today we headed north to explore the areas of steppe to the north west of Trujillo near the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. As we approached Trujillo the cold mist closed in giving poor visibility, never the less we pressed on and headed out through the rolling Holm Oak dehesa, where Azure-winged Magpies, Hoopoe and Iberian Grey Shrike were numerous. A Wryneck perched on a roadside fence and Thekla Lark foraged in the nearby scrubby pasture.

As we moved out on to the steppe the sun started to burn through the thick mist revealing small groups of Little and Great Bustards in the fields along with hundreds of wintering Lapwings. The distinct calls of Black-bellied Sandgrouse alerted us to the presence of birds flying past showing their distinct black bellies, and although hearing Pin-tailed Sandgrouse we couldn't locate them in the clearing mist. Red Kite, Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier were all present but the raptor highlight was a juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle squabbling with a pair of Golden Eagles on the ground in an adjacent field. The birds eventually split up with the Imperial Eagle perching up on a boulder allowing us to have prolonged views and appreciate its size and distinctive ginger colouration.

Lunch was enjoyed by the Rio Magasca where numerous Serin, Chiffchaff and Blackcap flitted about in the scrub. As the day warmed up, Griffon and Black Vultures circled overhead along with another juvenile and an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle. As we moved on after lunch we observed more Little and Great Bustards, with one flock of the later very close to the road in the afternoon sun allowing us to appreciate their rich rusty and grey plumage.

In the afternoon we split up with one half of the group electing to visit the magnificent ancient town of Trujillo while the rest of the group made another visit to Belen plain finding more bustards and a lone Merlin. In the evening we headed back into Trujillo to enjoy an evening meal at a local restaurant.

Day 4

Sunday 25th December

Cold to start, then sunny and mild

After breakfast we headed south towards the fertile plains of Madrigalejo and Zorita, calling en-route at a patch of steppe near Campo Lugar. Upon entering the stony arid steppe we soon located 40 stately Great Bustards and further on down the road we encountered a flock of about 100 Little Bustards in an adjacent field. Around mid-morning we moved on to the nearby dam at the Embalse de Sierra Brava that gave us views over the large expanse of water. Huge rafts of thousands of wintering wildfowl were present at the lake, including Gadwall, Mallard, Wigeon, Pintail and Shoveler. In addition, Great Crested Grebe and coot were numerous. As we moved on around the lake and followed a concrete aqueduct, we found many Green Sandpipers along with Kingfisher and several Thekla Larks.

After moving away from the dam we discovered Dartford Warbler in a patch of roadside scrub, then we headed towards our picnic site under the Holm Oaks with a view over the lake. Over lunch we noted Great White Egret, Peregrine and Black Stork. After lunch we headed towards the fertile rice and maze fields below the dam that were occupied by flocks of feeding cranes along with Cattle Egrets, White Stork and Lapwing. A search of the paddy fields discovered Waxbill, Golden Plover and Snipe, along with a stunning male Bluethroat that posed on the roadside fence.

In the late afternoon we moved on to explore other areas of nearby flooded stubble fields seeing huge flocks of Spanish Sparrow and masses of feeding cranes. Marsh Harriers were abundant and we also observed a magnificent male Hen Harrier catch its prey before us. As sunset approached we headed home, but were delayed by the sight of a pair of Black-shouldered Kites perched on roadside telephone wires which made a perfect end to an enjoyable Christmas day.

Day 5

Monday 26th December

A cool start, sunny and mild later

We woke to a bright start and decided to go east and explore the nearby Sierra Villuercas mountain range. We entered rolling dehesa with its Hoopoes and flocks of Azure-winged Magpies as we gradually climbed in altitude. A brief and picturesque stop alongside the Rio Almonte discovered Firecrest and obliging Dartford and Sardinian Warblers.

We continued on heading for the hilltop village of Cabanas del Castillo. The village is perched high up on a granite ridge with commanding views to the horizon and a small castle at the very top of the rock behind. Most of the group elected to go to the top to search for Alpine Accentor, but unfortunately we drew a blank on the Accentors. However, we had panoramic views of the mountain scenery and soaring Griffon Vultures before descending back to the village for lunch.

After our leisurely lunch we headed over into the next valley en-route to the pico at 1600m. En-route we stopped to have a look at a recently stripped cork oak forest and whilst there we witnessed a pair of Firecrests feeding above us.

We took a tight windy concrete road from the valley bottom to the old army base at the top of the jagged peaks in search of Alpine Accentors which normally winter around the summit, however we were disappointed to find workmen there disturbing the peace. However, we did have fantastic views over the surrounding countryside and the town of Guadalupe, as well as a fleeting glimpse of an Iberian Wall Lizard basking in the winter sun. We descended down the other side of the mountain via the town of Guadalupe with its impressive mountain monastery and headed back to enjoy a wonderful evening meal at our comfortable rural hotel.

Day 6

Tuesday 27th December

Mild with sunny with a foggy start at Almaraz

On our final full day in Extremadura we decided to explore the rich wetlands around Almaraz and the Embalse de Arrocampo in the morning and re-visit Monfragüe in the afternoon. A sunny start greeted us first thing at the hotel but as we headed east towards Almaraz we descended into thick freezing fog around the low lying wetlands. After a brief stop in a local café to warm up, the mist was still struggling to lift but we did manage to locate a couple of Purple Swamphens and a number of Cetti's Warblers. With no improvement in the fog, we headed off towards the national park, emerging back into the bright winter sunshine noting Black-shouldered Kite and feeding parties of Common Cranes en-route.

We arrived on the eastern edge of Monfragüe National Park at the Portilla del Tietar via some old areas of cork oak dehesa to be greeted by the site of circling vultures. We stopped here in the sun to enjoy our last picnic lunch of the trip watching Griffon and the odd Black Vulture circling above us. A grey looking fox strolled around the river bank as a feeding otter caught an amazing seven fish below us as we watched it. Parties of Azure-winged Magpies flitted through the scrub before a majestic adult Spanish Imperial Eagle glided into view, circling above us before perching up on the rock in front of us. This magnificent and rare raptor sat in the sun, preening occasionally and allowing us to get exceptional views for at least half an hour, before taking off shortly after an immature Golden Eagle drifted low above it over the ridge. After another brief circle around it returned to its perch on the rock giving us more views of its diagnostic dark plumage and pale shoulder patches, before we had to move on further into the park and leave it sat in the afternoon sun.

By mid-afternoon we arrived again at the Penafalcon, this time to be greeted by hundreds of perched and circling Griffon Vultures in the bright winter sunshine. Firecrest, Blue rock Thrush and Black Redstarts were all noted but the highlight of the stop was a pair of stunning Black Wheatears feeding on the rocks below the road. Another otter swam in the river below us and a pair of courting Griffon Vultures posed on a nearby rock for all to admire and photograph. As the afternoon drew in, we headed back to the hotel, calling en-route in Trujillo to pick up a few souvenirs to take home.

Day 7

Wednesday 28th December

Mild and sunny

On our final morning we enjoyed our last breakfast before loading the vans and saying our goodbyes to our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. On the drive to the airport we observed Azure-winged Magpie, Common Crane, White Storks and numerous Red Kites. We arrived at Madrid airport in plenty of time before getting our British Airways flight back to the UK where we all said farewell at arrivals before continuing our journeys back home.

Species List

Birds (H = heard only; ✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				100			
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2		2	1	4	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	4	100+		50+	
4	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>				2			
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	10	30+	20+	400+	20	30+	30+
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				6			
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	2	2	20+	2	6	1
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		1	3	30+	2	10	10
9	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				3			
10	Greylag	<i>Anser anser</i>		15+		7			
11	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>				2000+			
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4	4	3000+	20		
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>				1000+			
14	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				40+			
15	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				500+			
16	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				3		1	
17	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10+	15	30+	20+	10+	20+	10
18	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		2	8	2		20	
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	30+	30+	200	50+	100+	400+	10
20	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			1	10			
21	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1		1			
22	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1		1	
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	6+	10+	15+	20+	15	15	10
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			2			1	
25	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca adalberti</i>			3			1	
26	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10+	15+	10+	10+	2	3	8
27	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1		1	
28	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1				
29	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1	6	3			
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							H
31	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				2		6	
32	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				300+	6		
33	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>						4	
34	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	30+	200+	100+	3000+		1500+	200
35	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		18	80+	40			
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		45	40	100			
37	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			6	30+			
38	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	400+	2000+	3000+	2000+	200+	200	60
39	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				60			
40	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1	1	2		H	
41	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2		20+			
42	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1		60+			
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	6		6	200			
44	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				6			
45	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			1				
46	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>			20+				
47	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>			H				

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
48	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1			2		3	
49	Feral/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>	H						
52	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H				
53	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1	1	1			
54	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2	6	1	2	
55	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	3	20	30+	45	10	2	2
56	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					1		
57	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>			1				
58	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				2			
59	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2	50+	50+			
60	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	6	50+	300+	100+	20	12	20+
61	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			6	20+			
62	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		30	200+	40			
63	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	30+				50	20	
64	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				2			
65	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		6	20+	6		2	
66	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		3+	2	1	2	2	
68	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H			H	
69	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	10+	10+		✓	✓	4
70	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		15+	10+	6	20	15	2
71	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>				4			
72	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	6	30+	20+	30+	✓	✓	8
73	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>						2	
74	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	2	3			5	8	
75	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1			2	1	
77	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓		10	3	
78	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				10+			
79	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1H				3H	
80	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				1	3		
81	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		15+	30+	6	1	✓	
82	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	H	H			6	2	
83	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		4	10+	20+	15	6	
84	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>			1		3	1	
85	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					1		
86	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		4	2	2	1	1	
87	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	20+	8	4	1	2	
88	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		H			15	6	
89	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		H			H		
90	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1					
91	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		20+	30+	50+	10+	3	2
92	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	2000+	8000+	5000+	1000+	✓	✓	✓
93	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1	1			H	2	
94	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	20+	40+	100+	20+	30+	40+	30+
96	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		6	10+				
97	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		3	10+	10+	6	4	
98	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			2				

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
99	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		400+	200+	500+	✓	✓	
101	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		10+					
103	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		6	10+	20+	10	2	
104	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		H	1	✓			
105	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	300+	400+	✓	✓	10	✓
106	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	H	30	10	6		2	
107	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	30+	400+	500+	500+	30	20	30+
108	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	2				1		
109	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>						1	
110	Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				200+			

Mammals

Iberian Hare

Rabbit

Red Fox

Red Deer

Otter

Fallow Deer

Roe Deer

Herptiles

Iberian Wall Lizard

Butterflies

Red Admiral

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