

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 8 February 2011



Great Bustards by Byron Palacios



European Otter by Byron Palacios



Griffon Vultures over Peña Falcon by Peter Dunn



Hawfinch by Peter Dunn

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios and Peter Dunn



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Summary

The winter is another good reason to see one of the most popular sites of Spain. Once again, a new venture for Naturetrek, with a late winter visits to the plains and mountains of Extremadura, where wildfowl, cranes, passerines and waders gather away from the harsh northern winters, offering to us great birding entertainment alongside wonderful landscapes and superb food!

Day 1

Wednesday 2nd February

Flight London to Madrid and road journey to Trujillo

Some of us started this trip on the day before from their homes, in order to be in time for our morning flight to Madrid. After a good flight and a walk through Madrid-Barajas airport, we picked our luggage with no problems, sorted out our vehicles and started our trip down to the heart of Extremadura, Trujillo. The motorway and roads were fairly clear making our driving smooth, whilst the sunny afternoon made the journey even more enjoyable as we overlooked the wonderful countryside landscape on the slopes of the Gredos Mountains. We had a comfort stop and soon continued our journey, arriving in the area of Trujillo in the late afternoon and straight to Viña Las Torres where our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen accommodated us in their lovely finca, followed by a welcome drink and superb dinner.

Day 2

Thursday 3rd February

Santa Martha de Magasca & Monroy Road

We started today having a delicious breakfast, enjoying the surroundings of Vina Las Torres. The morning looked clear, dry and sunny; though the hint of the cold temperature reminded us we were still in a typical ‘Extremenian’ winter morning. With the sun rising ahead, we drove up towards Santa Marta de Magasca, making a thirty-minute stop in the town of Trujillo in order to collect some local goods for our picnic lunch. This allowed the rest of the party to walk through the narrowed-street ancient town, rich in architectonic remains from the conquistador’s days, plus some interesting birds such as Crag Martins and Eurasian Hoopoes around the church. We reassembled again, and continued our driving down to the River Magasca's lower basin, where the dehesas and steppes brought us very interesting birds. A few stops produced Woodlark, Dartford Warbler, Corn Buntings, Stonechat, Spanish Sparrow, Crested Lark, Lapwing, Skylark, Goldfinch, amongst others. A small group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse was seen in one of the fields in the middle distance, not far from a group of fourteen Great Bustards and plenty of Calandra Larks displaying and actively flying over the same spot. A good start for the morning without a doubt!

Soon we travelled along a local farm track amongst the local ‘retinto’ cattle, and stopped on the highest point which allowed us plenty of visibility and views the steppe area, bringing excellent views of three Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight. The morning also offered a great stage for raptors to soar around; this time, a few Red Kites were soaring above a cork oak area visible in the distance, together with two young adults of the endemic Spanish Imperial Eagle. We continued another two kilometres along the track in order to find a good spot to set up and enjoy our picnic lunch. While we worked on this, the group went for a meander around the tracks from where good birds such as Black Vultures, more Great Bustards, Calandra Larks and even a pair of wintering Common Crane were seen.

Soon after we lunched, the winter cold melted as the temperature suddenly went up to 15°C with bright sun. We then went back to the road and to the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, diverting eastwards onto the Monroy – Trujillo old road. The narrow tarmac track was full of birds as numerous Corn Buntings, Stonechats, Iberian Grey Shrike, Linnets and Lapwings crowded the meadows and fields alongside. However, a quick stop by the river bridge was not as active as we expect, apart from the always lovely European Kingfisher, Blue Rock Thrush and Blackcap. We continued on the road keeping an eye on the birds moving along it, making short stops and on-board checks; soon they produced interesting birds such an early returning Great Spotted Cuckoo, a male Hen Harrier, Griffon Vultures, Red Kites and Common Buzzard. A group of more than eighty Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were seen roosting on the ground in one of the fields not far from the vehicles, producing fantastic and much closer views than the ones we had earlier in the day. We also saw a group of approximately twelve Little Bustards in flight and crossing over the road. We started to make our way back to Vina Las Torres to have a break, enjoying a nice drink while waiting for a delicious local dinner!

Day 3

Friday 4th February

Monfragüe National Park

After an early breakfast, we hit the road heading north, driving on a beautiful sunny morning and admiring the unique landscape of the region. A quick stop along the main road to see a group of about forty Common Cranes roosting amongst the ‘dehesa’ (cork oak meadows) and about to spread around later on the day. The journey to our first stop within Monfragüe National Park took around forty-five minutes, and we drove up to the castle of the same name, which allowed us to overlook a vast portion of the park as the River Tajo basin.

Dozens of Griffon Vultures flying eye-level whilst hundreds of them were sat on the Peña Falcon rocky cliffs. Down below there were a lot of active Blackcaps, Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes. While Griffons were soaring and landing around the highest pinnacle, two Peregrine Falcons joined the action round the busy cliffs, flying as fast as usual and giving us a great show of speed and flight diving. Soon after that, a Spanish Imperial Eagle tried to approach to the pinnacle but soon was mobbed and sent away by the two fast Peregrines.

In spite of the bright sun, the chilly late morning suggested a quick break over a hot drink in the tiny village of Villareal de San Carlos, which was also a good comfort stop before continuing to our next stop at the hydroelectric power station, where we set up our picnic lunch. This superb place produced dozens of Azure-winged Magpie, Black Vultures flying in the blue sky, House Martins, a single Barn Swallow (both flying around the reservoir's bridge), together with a well-spotted adult Bonelli's Eagle.

After enjoying our lunch, we continued our driving along the Tietar Dam, where we stopped to enjoy the landscape and the prominent cliffs occupied by more Griffon Vultures. As soon as we arrived, three European Otters entertained us with a wonderful show with their fishing and nuptial swimming for over thirty minutes, what a special bonus for the day! We then started our drive back to Trujillo, making a quick stop in a pine patch of forest looking for some passerines. Although it was a bit quiet, we managed to see a flock of the Iberian race of Long-tailed Tits and a Short-toed Treecreeper. We continued our journey back to Viña Las Torres for a well deserved break and to enjoy our local drinks and dinner.

Day 4

Saturday 5th February

Montanech & Campo Lugar

Another beautiful morning, although chilly - the sun was rising and hitting the rolling hills and steppes... We drove up out of Viña Las Torres aiming to head southwest towards Sierra de Montanech, via Trujillo. Lapwing, Common Buzzard, Mallard, Red Kite, Corn Bunting, Hoopoe and more birds were seen while we were driving into the Sierra, where the village of Montanech lies, well known for producing fine and great Iberian ham and for being the cradle of the King's Royal Army during medieval days. We drove through its narrow streets until we got to the top where the castle remains are located. A good walk around the building allowed us to get great views of Alpine Accentor, Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush whilst we enjoyed the fantastic views of the surrounding areas, confirming why the medieval Spanish Army chose this place for its strategic position. On the slopes by the castle and next to the cemetery, lots of Serin, Blue and Great Tits, Sardinian Warbler and Black Redstart were very active, flitting around the rocky walls and short vegetation. We walked down to check the boulder area in search for more species such as Eagle Owl but without any luck.

After that, we set up our picnic lunch at the cemetery park, ideal place to spot many raptors and 'garden birds' such as Serin, Stonechat, Sardinian Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Common Kestrel, Black Redstart, and more. We enjoyed our picnic and went back through the narrow streets, towards our lodgings, birding en route, making a sort of loop through Miajadas. Thousands of Common Cranes were spotted in one of the fields around this village - it was something amazing, seeing these birds wintering in the fields in such large groups. Other highlights here were Fan-tailed Warbler, Marsh Harrier and Iberian (Southern) Great Shrike. Pleased at seeing all these Common Cranes properly, we continued our drive into the steppes of Campo Lugar.

In spite of seeing interesting species here such as Calandra Larks, Marsh Harrier, Hoopoe, Great Bustards and large flocks of Spanish Sparrows along the track, there was no sign of other target birds we were expecting in this place. We were nearly about to set off when we spotted three Little Bustards walking away from us in one of the fields, and managed to see them well. We returned to our hotel in order to get ready for dinner, and of course some drinks and nibbles beforehand!

Day 5

Sunday 6th February

Sierra Brava Reservoir and rice fields

We departed the hotel after breakfast with a clear blue sky again and headed south to an area of rice fields near to the Sierra Brava Reservoir. Our aim was to come in from the south and work north with the sun behind us but we came across a huge flock of Common Cranes by the side of the main road, just before Madrigalejo. Here we were able to watch (and hear) this huge flock move about the fields. In the same place we were able to study both exotic finches which inhabit the area with large numbers of Common Waxbills and a few Red Avadavats. In the flooded fields a Green Sandpiper and Common Snipe fed and a Little Ringed Plover flew over calling.

We then moved onto the east side of the main road and took a track which meandered through the rice fields to the reservoir. Compared to November, White Storks had increased and were paired up 'bill clapping' on nests, and cranes could be seen in groups in all directions. A target bird here was Black-shouldered Kite and we were not disappointed as one sat above what looked like a nest and then proceeded to display with its unusual 'bat-flight' In the same area we saw a distant displaying pair of Hen Harriers, Marsh Harrier and a couple of Great White Egrets.

The next stop was a small patch of marsh where a Bluethroat had taken up territory in November. Initial signs were poor with no reaction and only Reed Bunting being added to the tally but both Peter and Byron heard a distinctive alarm call and soon we were watching a nice winter plumage male, scolding us from some willows and later juncus. Having had an excellent morning we headed along a fisherman's track to the east shore of the reservoir where we had our picnic lunch, in solitude apart from the sound of cranes and Greylag Geese in the background. Here also we added species such as Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon, Coot, Great Crested Grebes and spotted two more Otters. After a leisurely lunch in fine warm spring temperatures we headed back to cross the dam and study some fine specimens of Thekla Lark, with the leaders pointing out all the salient features. At this point we also saw a flock of 27 Great Bustards fly down the valley and alight in the field.

The rest of the day was spent checking further rice fields with their large numbers of cranes, waxbills, Spanish Sparrows and Avadavats and also re-visiting the nearby Little Bustard site (without success) before returning back to our hotel, where we enjoyed another magnificent dinner and completed the days log.

Day 6

Monday 7th February

Saucedilla (Arrocampo) Dam, Monfragüe National Park & Belen

We had breakfast at the usual time and set off heading north through Trujillo, where a quick stop for goods was made. Afterwards, we drove forty minutes on the motorway heading north towards the Saucedilla (Arrocampo) Dam.

The weather was glorious, though very chilly once we arrived to the marshes, yet we had great light and were able to see Purple Swamphen beautifully, plus Marsh Harrier, Moorhen, Common Chiffchaff, Spanish Sparrow, Kingfisher, amongst others. We moved to the second hide where two more Purple Swamphens were wandering amongst the reed hedges, while Cetti's Warblers were calling from everywhere.

As the morning was passing by, we started on our way back making a loop through the Placencia motorway until we hit the EX-208 into the beautiful Monfragüe National Park, where we found a pleasant place to have our picnic lunch. Lots of Barn Swallows, House and Crag Martins, together with Song and Mistle Thrushes, Griffon and Black Vultures, Red Kite, Long-tailed Tits, Blackcap and Sardinian Warbler were spotted here. But the highlight of this spot was a single Black Stork which flew by right over our heads, a wonderful sighting of this most-wanted bird!

After lunch, we made a quick stop at Peña Falcon to see these wonderful rock formations, home of many interesting species. We were once again surrounded by dozens of Griffon Vultures and also Black Vulture, White Stork and by a very fast Peregrine Falcon. We also had great views of a pair of very active Firecrest, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, and a singular Short-toed Treecreeper which was feeding on the rock crags in a particular Wallcreeper style!

We continued driving south in order to make our last stop of the day exploring the plains around the village of Belen, just in the outskirts of Trujillo. Corn Buntings, Hoopoes, Calandra and Crested Larks, Lapwings and more usual steppe birds were flitting and crossing the track constantly. The visit paid off after we found a group of twenty-five Little Bustards in one of the adjacent fields, getting much better views of all the individuals grazing in the fields. A group of twelve Great Bustards were also seen in the opposite field. After this highlight, we decided to drive back to our place a bit earlier than usual in order to start our preparation for our trip to Madrid the following morning. And also, of course, to enjoy the usual drinks and last dinner together!

Day 7

Tuesday 8th February

Travel back to the UK

After an early breakfast, we sorted out our luggage and belongings and hit the road towards Madrid-Barajas airport, after saying MUCHAS GRACIAS to Belen and Juan Pedro for looking after us throughout the week. A few birds were spotted by some of us while driving; a pair of Eurasian Jays, Magpie, Common Kestrel, Red Kite, Hen Harrier, and even a group of eight Great Bustards were seen en route. We arrived at Madrid-Barajas airport in time to catch our flight, which was delayed nearly an hour but we made up almost all the time with a good tail wind home. Once in London Heathrow, we said the proper 'good bye' and wished our very best to each other, bearing in mind the wonderful time we had together 'wintering' for seven days in the vast and beautiful Extremadura....!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	2	20	10	2	2	1	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					500		
3	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					✓		
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					1		
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	2		✓	✓	✓	
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					✓		
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					✓		
8	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓		
9	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					2	2	
10	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					✓		
11	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>						1	
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	30	20	8	50	100	✓	✓
13	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	100		1	20	✓	✓	✓
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	1	2	1	6	4	
15	Western Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					4		
16	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1		2	✓	2	
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	1	12		✓	✓	
18	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>					1		
19	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10	20	2	6	6	10	2
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		80	300	10		200	
21	Cinereous (Black) Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		2	10			5	
22	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2			1	4	1	
23	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus cyaneus</i>		1			2		1
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					1		
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4	7	5	10	✓	9	✓
26	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		2	1				
27	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>			1				
28	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	4	3	1	1	7	5	✓
29	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1		
30	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2			1	
31	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		45		20	27	12	6
32	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		14		3		25	
33	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					1		
34	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>						4	
35	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					1	3	
36	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓	5	
37	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		2	60	3000	5000	4	4
38	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		100		✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					1		
41	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					1		
42	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					3	1	
43	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						1	
44	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					3	1	
45	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					2		
46	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		40	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>					✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1		2		2	12	
49	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		100		6			
50	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		5					
51	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		1					
55	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2			1		
56	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1			1	2	
57	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	4	1	3	15	8	
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				H			
59	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		12	3	12	✓	9	4
60	Eurpoean Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					✓		2
61	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		40	30	4	40	10	10
62	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	3	✓	1	2		1	
65	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	1	6	6	2	
66	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>						1	
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		400		✓	100	80	
70	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	6	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		3			4	1	
72	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1	H		H		
73	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		100		✓	60		
74	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			5	8		5	
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		3	15	10		4	
76	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		10	60	✓	✓	✓	
77	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					H	2	
78	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			1				
79	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		2	3	1	✓	✓	
80	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				2	4	4	
81	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		2		10	✓	7	
82	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1			1		
83	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	1	H	4	✓			
84	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>						1	
85	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1	H	H	1	
86	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			2			1	
87	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			1	1		1	
88	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		5	6	✓	✓	✓	
90	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		3	2				
91	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		H	10	✓	2	✓	
92	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2	3			2	
93	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	2	2	2			
94	White-spotted Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica cyanecula</i>					2		
95	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	2	10	6	12	✓		
96	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
97	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1	3	2			
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	8
99	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		5		60	C	C	
100	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>					C		
101	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>					✓		
102	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				4			
103	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				1	H	H	
104	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1	H	1		
105	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	4	5	3	12	10	✓	✓
	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>	1						
106	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	2	✓	✓	✓	
107	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
108	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		2		12	H	H	
109	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		3	3	✓	✓		
110	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			2				
111	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
112	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
113	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			1	5	3		
114	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
115	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1				
116	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					5	2	

Other Taxa recorded

Red Fox, Red Deer, Rabbit, Viperine Snake. Small Tortoiseshell, Bath White, Small Copper, Wall Brown, Spanish Chalkhill Blue, Brimstone, Red Admiral, Speckled Wood, Hummingbird Hawk-moth, Bat sp (day flying)

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