

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 13 February 2012



Alpine Accentor



Blue Rock Thrush



Great and Little Bustards



Purple Swamphen

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Summary

This is a great place to enjoy winter and all the wildlife highlights it brings with it...the great outdoors, lush scenery, forests, plains and crags, this is a beautiful region of Extremadura. Wintering cranes, early ‘summer visitors’, new residents, majestic bustards, local mammals and more, have been the attractions of this journey. Alongside all the great wildlife, our adventure has been complemented by the service and care of our hosts, great accommodation and wonderful food!

Day 1

Tuesday 7th February

Flight London to Madrid and road journey to Trujillo

We had a morning flight to Madrid. After a good flight and a walk through Madrid-Barajas airport, we picked up our luggage and walked out to meet our co-leader Julian, ‘the Basque machine’! Once we were all sorted, we started our trip to the heart of Extremadura, to 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 slopes of the Gredos Mountains. We had a comfort stop which produced the first records for our checklist; Crested Lark, Serin, Iberian Grey Shrike, and Spotless Starling, amongst others. We soon continued our journey, arriving in the area of Trujillo in the late afternoon and straight to Viña Las Torres where hosts Juan Pedro and Belen were ready to welcome us to their lovely finca, followed by a drink and superb dinner.

Day 2

Wednesday 8th February

Santa Marta de Magasca & Belen Plains

We started today right after dawn, enjoying a delicious breakfast and the surroundings of Vina Las Torres. The morning looked clear, dry and sunny; though the wind was still bringing the cold air of a typical ‘Extremenian’ early winter morning. With the sun rising ahead, we drove up towards Trujillo to the first site to be explored this morning, the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca. The River Magasca travels through the Trujillo's main belt from north to south and the habitats are the typical dehesa and the steppes themselves. The lower basin, at the conjunction of these two main habitats, brought us very interesting birds. A few stops along the access road produced several Crested Larks, Iberian Grey Shrike, Hoopoes, Red Kite, Corn Buntings, Spanish Sparrows, Goldfinch, Lapwing, amongst others.

We continued and made a detour onto a farm dirt track which provided us with a key position to be able to scan the vast area. The field was basically covered with abundant numbers of European Lapwing, with a few European Golden Plovers around. Very active Calandra Larks were constantly displaying or showing off, giving us great views. As soon as we started walking down the track, three Great Bustards flew across the upper track landing in one of the fields next to the track. We had great views of these individuals and even better views of a second group of over forty individuals, with some males even in display! A small group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse was seen really clearly as they flew around us against the blue sky. More Great Bustards and plenty of Calandra Larks were displaying and actively flying over the same spot - a good start for the morning without a doubt!

We continued in along a local farm track seeing the local ‘retinto’ cattle, and turned back in order to drive to the next scheduled site of the morning. A big bird landing made us stop all of a sudden, it was a juvenile – but yet massive – Golden Eagle, a nice surprise indeed! We saw the bird really well! After a 20 minute drive to the other side of the village drainage river we saw an adult Golden Eagle flying with a juvenile – possibly the same two year old individual. 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 did this, the group went for a meander around the tracks seeing good birds such as Black Vultures, Griffon Vultures, more Calandra Larks, European Kestrel, Eurasian Lapwing and European Golden Plover. Soon after we had lunch, we started driving the vehicles down the road in search of more interesting birds. The search paid off with a pair of Black Vultures, and more than a dozen Pin-tailed Sandgrouse spotted in one of the adjacent fields. We got great views of these colossal birds!

Satisfied by the sighting, we moved through Trujillo down to its south-eastern outskirts to the area known as Belen Plains. The activity here was quite slow and less productive than the morning; however, farmland birds such as Linnet, Goldfinch, Calandra and Crested Larks, Corn Bunting, Lapwing and others were seen around. We drove off the road towards the foothills where we had great views of a nice pair of Thekla Lark, Dartford Warbler, and Stonechat, amongst others.

We started to head back towards our hotel but a pristine male Hen Harrier caught our eye as he glided along the fields spooking European Golden Plovers, Lapwing and even a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. A very nice ending to our day! We made our way back to Vina Las Torres to have a break, enjoying a nice drink while waiting for a delicious local dinner!

Day 3

Thursday 9th February

Monfragüe National Park

The day started clear and sunny...very promising weather wise! After a relaxing breakfast, we hit the road heading north, driving along the quiet roads and the lush landscapes of the region. A group of Common Cranes (over fifty) made us stop along the main road from where we had fantastic views of them, roosting amongst the 'dehesa' (cork oak and meadows habitat).

We continued driving to within Monfragüe National Park at the point known as Salto de El Gitano (Gypsy Fall) or also known as Peña Falcon rocky cliffs. Dozens of Griffon Vultures and a few Monk Vultures were actively soaring around and getting some warmth from the sunlight while perched on the rocks. Down below there were a lot of active Blackcaps, Black Redstarts and a very beautiful Blue Rock Thrush which perched right in front of us, a brilliant bird! 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; one of them (a male individual) caught a Rock Dove and landed on the cliff to eat it, giving us fantastic scope views of him.

The sun was partially hitting the cliffs but not enough to warm us up so we suggested a quick break over a hot drink in the tiny village of Villareal de San Carlos. A few Meadow Pipits and a single wintering Water Pipit was seen as we parked our vans to go for a hot drink in one of the local cafes, before continuing to our next stop at the hydroelectric power station, where we set up our picnic lunch. The dam's water level was very low, allowing Snipe, Common Sandpiper, White and Grey Wagtails and Black Redstarts to feed in the shallow waters. The spot also produced dozens of Azure-winged Magpies, many Griffon Vultures, two Black Vultures flying in the blue sky, and Crag Martins.

After enjoying our lunch, we continued driving along the park main road and made our final stop at the point known as Portilla del Tietar Dam, part of El Tajo River, where we stopped to enjoy the landscape and the prominent cliffs occupied by more Griffon Vultures. As soon as we arrived, a pair of stunning Spanish Imperial Eagles in flight satisfied our desire to see in detail this fantastic and most wanted species of European eagle. Lots of Cormorants and Ravens were seen along the dam, along with Blue Rock Thrush, Blackcap and Robins amongst the surrounding bushes. A group of Red Deer was seen shortly after we left the area. We then made our journey back to Viña Las Torres for a well deserved break and to enjoy our local drinks and dinner.

Day 4

Friday 10th February

Montanchez & Campo Lugar (Dehesa area)

We had another beautiful chilly morning, although the sun was rising and hitting the rolling hills and steppes, and we were definitely positive for an even warmer day than yesterday. We drove up out of Viña Las Torres aiming to head southwest towards Sierra de Montanchez, via Trujillo. A few 'common' usual birds were seen along the road such as Lapwing, Common Buzzard, Mallard, Red Kite, and Black-winged Stilt, Corn Bunting, Hoopoe and more birds. After 40 minutes we arrived at the village of Montanchez, a medieval and strategically located shire which lies on the side of the Sierra de Montanchez - a well known site for producing fine and great Iberian ham and for being the cradle of the King's Royal Army during medieval days.

We managed to drive through its narrow streets to the very top end where the castle remains are located. It was calm and quiet at the top, with a few Black Redstart and Sardinian Warbler moving above the allotments. A very shy Rock Bunting, Goldfinch and Common Chiffchaff were seen very quickly. A good walk around the ruins allowed us to get great views of Alpine Accentor, which replied to the playback as there were no signs of them at the moment of our arrival. There were also a few House Martins, and lots of Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush. We enjoyed the fantastic views of the surrounding area, and could see why the army chose this important view point. We then decided to explore the rocky area next to the cemetery, down towards the northwest slope of the castle. More Black Redstart, Thekla Lark, Common Chiffchaff and Stonechat were seen here, but it was a beautifully perched Eagle Owl which caused a frenetic joy. The massive owl was roosting right below the main castle base and was perched enjoying the much improved winter morning weather.

After that, a coffee break was taken in the village, and then we left the site and drove on to the area of Campo Lugar, where we set up our picnic lunch at a lush and peaceful dehesa area. After lunch, we took a good stroll along the old track surrounded by old rocky walls, where several good birds were seen such as Hoopoe, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Serin, Stonechat, Sardinian Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Common Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Black Redstart, Corn Bunting, Meadow Pipit, Wood Lark, Firecrest, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Crested Lark, Linnet, Goldfinch, and more.

We walked back to our vehicles and started our drive towards Trujillo where we planned make a small tour through the town. After this, we continued our return journey to Viña Las Torres for supper and to do our checklist and discuss our plans for the following day.

Day 5

Saturday 11th February

Sierra Brava Reservoir & Campo Lugar (plains)

It was another chilly morning but a promising bright orange horizon anticipated a sunny clear blue sky again! We drove up out of our lodge area and headed south to Campo Lugar. This time we explored the steppes, but not for long. As soon as we hit the agricultural road, a group of more than forty Little Bustards were spotted from the vehicle as we started to scan the meadows. We soon jumped off the vehicles in order to have scope views of them and at least six Great Bustards were grazing amongst the group of Little Bustards. The light could not be better as the sunlight was hitting them beautifully. A male Marsh Harrier was soaring along the opposite fields; but our attention was caught by a group of flushed European Golden Plovers chased by a hungry Peregrine Falcon which lost his breakfast snack due to a millimetre of inaccuracy and he failed to catch a plover in flight. Unlucky! Other birds such as Lapwing, Calandra and Crested Larks, Meadow Pipit, Little Owl, White Stork and more were also seen at this productive site.

Many flying Common Cranes were seen from various directions, so we decided to continue down the road towards Madrigalejo in order to check the rice fields which surround the area. A huge flock of Cranes were seen in the distance but they started to fly away as soon as we walked towards the rice field where they were feeding. They landed on adjacent rice fields which were out of view as we were already on foot. Nevertheless, heavy flocks of Corn Buntings, Spanish Sparrows, Goldfinch and the introduced Common Waxbill were seen at this site. Several Red Avadavats were also spotted amongst the dry reed hedges along the track.

We moved onto the east side of the main road and took a track which meandered through the rice fields to the reservoir, where the activity suddenly slowed down as lunch time was approaching, so we continued driving around the main reservoir in order to find a nice patch to set up our picnic lunch. We then explored some of the hides located along the shores of the reservoir, from where we spotted a large amount of waterfowl spread out across the centre of the reservoir; birds such as Eurasian Pochard, Gadwall, Shoveler, Little and Great Crested Grebes, Common Cranes, Shelduck, Eurasian Teal, and Pintail, amongst others.

We drove back to the plains of Campo Lugar in order to finish our afternoon there, getting great views of six Iberian Hares crossing the track as we left the reservoir dehesa area, which we managed to identify thanks to a photo taken by one of our fellow participants. As we arrived to Campo Lugar at the same spot we started from earlier on that morning, we again found the group of Little Bustards grazing at the same grounds just by a farm. We had even better views this time as they were slightly closer. It was a good end to the afternoon so we returned back to our hotel, where we enjoyed another magnificent dinner and completed the day's log.

Day 6

Sunday 12th February

Saucedilla (Arrocampo) Dam, Monfragüe National Park & Belen

We had breakfast at the usual time and set off heading north through Trujillo on the motorway, taking the exit which leads to the village of Saucedilla, making a very quick stop just after this as a Montagu's Harrier was spotted gliding over one of the adjacent fields. The weather was once again glorious, but definitely chilly! Once we arrived at the marshes we got to see a few Purple Swamphens beautifully as they were out in the open. A single Squacco Heron was also very conspicuous along the reed beds. We also saw Marsh Harrier, Common Snipe, Moorhen, Common Chiffchaff, and Kingfisher, amongst others. As we were targeting Little Bittern, we moved to the second hide located not far from the first one but we were not that lucky with them. Cetti's Warblers were calling from everywhere in the area.

After checking the hides and marshes, we planned to check the church of Saucedilla where a colony of Lesser Kestrels usually breed, making early arrivals at times, but I guess not yet this time... We bought some fresh bread and continued our drive southwards towards Monfragüe National Park. Just as we left Saucedilla, we were carefully checking the dehesa areas by the road and looking for the very uncommon Black-shouldered Kite. We found a pair which was mating and had the time to jump off the vehicles and set up our scopes to get the most amazing views of this lovely raptor.

As the morning was passing by we started our way back, in a loop via the beautiful Monfragüe National Park, and stopping at the point known as Portilla del Tietar, visited earlier in the week. An incredible pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles were soaring and showing off really well against the blue sky, what wonderful views we had of this magnificent bird!! We also watched one of them perched for more than ten minutes until it took off again. Many Griffon Vultures and a pair of Black Vultures passed by, plus Great Cormorants, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martins, and more were spotted here. We walked a few metres from this site to a lovely spot by the road to set up our picnic lunch.

After lunch, we made a quick stop at Peña Falcon to enjoy the 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 which was successfully hunting and eating just perched at the top of a

pinnacle. Just after that, a European Otter was spotted from one of the view points, swimming across the river and marking the territory along the shore, which allowed us to get brilliant views of it for quite a long time. We also watched a pair of very active Firecrests, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, and a singular Black Wheatear which was flitting around the rocky ravines not far from us, and very obliging!

After this exciting end of the day, we drove home 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 a very well deserved last dinner together!

Day 7

Monday 13th February

Travel back to the UK

After an early breakfast – and birthday singalong! – we sorted out our luggage and belongings and hit the road towards Madrid-Barajas airport. We sadly said ADIOS Y 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, plus Magpie, Common Kestrel, Red Kite, Hen Harrier, Common Buzzard, and some Common Cranes were seen en route. We made a quick break stop half way in order to have a coffee and use the facilities, and continued to Madrid-Barajas airport in time to catch our flight.

Once in London Heathrow, we said the proper ‘good bye’ and wished each other our very best, and appreciated the time we had together ‘wintering’ for seven days in the vast and beautiful Extremadura!

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