

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 12 November 2014



Blue Rock Thrush



Griffon & Cinereous Vultures



Little Bustard



Pin-tailed Sandgrouse

Report and images by Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Thursday 6th November

London Heathrow – Madrid – Trujillo.

Some of us started our journey from home the day before to be in time for our mid-morning flight from London to Madrid. After a good flight to Madrid-Barajas Airport we collected our luggage, sorted out the vehicle and then started our journey to the heart of Extremadura; the Trujillo area. After leaving the airport we used the ring motorway which surrounds Madrid and Castilla La Mancha. The roads were fairly clear making our driving smooth, and 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 where great Spanish-style coffee was more than welcome. In the early evening we arrived in the Trujillo area and our rural hotel Viña Las Torres where hosts Juan Pedro and Belen were ready to welcoming us to their lovely finca. We enjoyed a welcome drink and superb first dinner.

Day 2

Friday 7th November

Santa Marta de Magasca – Monroy road.

We woke up to a very wet and misty morning which was unexpected. We continued with our plan, enjoying a delicious breakfast before leaving all wrapped up in waterproofs as the rain continued. We were aware from the local forecast agency that it was going to become dryer in the area we were heading to - great news. We drove through Trujillo and headed west following the old road towards Cáceres and then taking the farm road of Santa Marta de Magasca. It was overcast but already dry as we drove through the beautiful Mediterranean forest and dehesa to the plains and steppes, making our very first stop at the edge of these two habitats. Here we found lots of birds including Corn Bunting, Crested Lark, Meadow Pipit, Eurasian Stonechat, Southern (Iberian) Grey Shrike, Northern Lapwing, Linnet, Serin and Dartford Warbler.

Following the farm road, a diversion onto a non-metalled track was crucial for efforts to see Black-bellied Sandgrouse and we had a group of 30+ flying around us and landing in a field where we had great views of them on the ground. Other birds seen along this track were Red Kite, Griffon Vulture, Eurasian Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Skylark, Red-legged Partridge, Iberian Grey Shrike, Corn Bunting, Meadow Pipit, Northern Lapwing, and hundreds of Calandra Larks.

We then continued, returning to the tarmac and passing the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. We reached the upper plains of Campos de Cáceres from where we saw large flocks of Northern Lapwings, Spotless Starlings, Meadow Pipits, Corn Buntings and Goldfinches amongst others. The weather continued to be dry, but was chilly

and at times a bit cloudy and overcast. Good thermals were blowing through the basin of the river Magasca, from where we spotted a large group of vultures flying very close to the main road. We had fantastic close up views of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures flying together right over our heads! It was great for comparing the identification features of the two species. Very happy after this event, we drove back to the village of Santa Marta de Magasca and enjoyed a lovely hot lunch in order to warm up from the chilly weather.

After lunch the weather improved dramatically and the sun shone in a clear blue sky. We continued our excursion by completing the loop we were doing along the northern plains of Trujillo and Magasca, and driving along a portion of the road to Monroy. From this road we scanned the fields which surround the old farms of the area and focussed on a pair of shrubby fields with low vegetation. Here we saw a large flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse which we all enjoyed watching, especially when they flew right in front of us, landing in the fields nearby. Then a single Great Bustard was spotted in one of the nearby fields too; a good way to end a very exciting day!

We then made our way back to Vina Las Torres where we had a break and enjoyed nice drinks while waiting for our delicious local dinner.

Day 3

Saturday 8th November

Campo Lugar – Madrigalejo – Sierra Brava Dam.

We had a relaxing breakfast and then drove south, through the village of Zorita and continued to the plains not far from the area known as Campo Lugar. We spotted large groups of Great Bustards and saw up to fifty of them in each group - it was amusing and very exciting as we had only seen a single individual the previous day - so seeing this species in large numbers was superb! We continued the drive amongst plenty of Marsh Harriers, Crested and Calandra Larks, Meadow Pipits, Stonechats, Northern Lapwings and flying Common Cranes. A single Little Owl was spotted on top of a pile of rocks too.

We continued our drive towards the village of Madrigalejo where large areas of rice fields attract interesting birds, especially the elegant Common Crane which winters on the Iberian Peninsula. We found some groups containing hundreds of birds feeding in the rice fields. We took a short stroll here and hundreds of Tree Sparrows were spotted moving from field to field, alongside some smaller groups of Spanish Sparrows too. Zitting Cisticolas were found flitting along the dirt tracks and the reed hedges, and eventually we all managed to see the very shy Common Waxbill and Red Avadavat. Other sightings included Cattle and Little Egrets, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Hoopoe and White Stork.

As it was a chilly late morning we had a coffee break in a local bar before continuing our excursion along the dehesa (Cork or Holm Oak, and meadows habitat) from where Cattle Egret, Iberian Grey Shrike and more Common Cranes were spotted. We soon reached the canals which lead to the main dam of Sierra Brava where we choose a nice corner of the lake to set up our picnic lunch which we all enjoyed very much. After lunch we explored the eastern corner of the dam by driving through a very pristine dehesa which produced two beautiful Iberian Hares and a few passerines included a very obliging Iberian Chiffchaff which we all enjoyed watching through the telescope.

By late afternoon massive dark clouds had taken over the sky and the threat of rain was imminent so we started to make our journey back to Viña Las Torres for a well deserved break, and to enjoy local drinks and a delicious dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 9th November

Monfragüe National Park – Saucedilla.

It was another beautiful but chilly morning with the rising sun hitting the rolling hills and steppes. We were hopeful for a sunnier day than yesterday. We drove out of Viña Las Torres and headed north towards Monfragüe National Park. We took a secondary 'Roman' road through picturesque countryside, passing through the village of Torrejón El Rubio and finally into the national park where we made our very first stop at the point known as Peña Falcon or 'El Salto del Gitano'. It was a nice sunny morning with clear blue skies and although chilly, it was perfect for the many dozens of vultures warming up and getting ready to finding a good thermal on which to fly. Amongst them were a few pairs of Cinereous Vultures but the great majority of individuals were Griffon Vultures. Some were already in flight but a good number were still sat on top of the cliffs which was great for us to see them at eye level and taking off a very short distance from where we were standing. We also had close views of a beautiful Blue Rock Thrush which posed for us on a nearby rocky crag - we had great views and photo opportunities. Crag Martin and Black Redstart were also seen very well, alongside Blue and Great Tits, Blackcap, and excellent views of a Short-toed Treecreeper.

As we were getting cold it was the time to move on and we continued towards the village of Villareal de San Carlos where we had a coffee break before carrying on with our exploration. The weather was still dry and sunny, but the wind was blowing a bit harder. This was good for raptors as we kept seeing large numbers of Griffon Vultures circling around together with a few Cinereous Vultures, Common Buzzards and Red Kites.

We then arrive at Portilla del Tietar where we carefully looked for the mighty Spanish Imperial Eagle and a few of us had superb views of this wonderful endemic raptor. Other birds spotted here (apart from the large group of Griffon Vultures) were Azure-winged (Iberian) Magpie, European Kingfisher, Great Cormorant, Northern Raven, and a single Black Stork soaring above our heads with the vultures. A small group of the European endemic Citril Finch was spotted too.

Next we journeyed towards the northern part of the park, and after having lunch near Serrejon, we continued to do some birding at Saucedilla marshes next to the Almarraz dam. To our surprise, the marshes' water levels were high around the reed beds which made it a bit difficult to find some of the birds which occur on the shores of the reeds. Despite this we managed to find some very good birds including Marsh Harrier, European Kingfisher, Great Crested Grebe, an unusual Squacco Heron, Eurasian Penduline Tit, Common Snipe and Green Sandpiper. White-spotted Bluethroat kept us all busy as we tried to see a pair on a reed moving in the strong winds. We also found a pair of Purple Gallinule (Purple Swamphen) near the shore.

We returned to our vehicle and drove back towards Trujillo and to our lodge at Viña Las Torres. In the evening we had supper, did our checklist and discussed plans for the following day.

Day 5

Monday 10th November

Montanchez Castle – Miajadas – Campo Lugar..

We had another chilly start to the day but with a promising bright orange horizon we anticipated a sunny morning. This time we drove south-west towards the village of Mantanchez in order to explore the medieval village from its ruined castle, home to some very interesting species during the winter. The village, a former military fortress due to its position, was strategically located to protect the area from potential invaders. Due to its shape we had to drive carefully through very narrow alleys to get to the castle. Once at the top we took a stroll around the ruins watching hundreds of Crag Martins soaring around us. We also saw Black Redstart, Goldfinch, Sardinian Warbler, Spotless Starling and Blue Rock Thrush. Next we headed down to the main plaza for a coffee break. Some of us took the opportunity to buy souvenirs and first-class Iberian ham to take home as Montanchez is the cradle of Iberian ham in this area.

We then carried on with our excursion, heading north-east towards the village of Miajadas where we had lunch followed by a final drive back to the plains of Campo Lugar to look for some of the elusive birds we had not seen earlier in the week. We checked a few spots on the vast steppes which surrounded us the whole time we were there and found a very nice group of Great Bustards which we all enjoyed watching again. Minutes later we found a group of Little Bustards which landed in a field not far from where we were. We stopped the vehicle and walked carefully into the field to get closer to them. We were delighted to get detailed views of a group of 19 Little Bustards. We enjoyed watching them for a while amongst the hay stubble - a great way to finishing the day!

Heavy dark clouds were covering the fields and the horizon, so with the risk of rain imminent, we returned to our vehicle and made our way back to our guest house, gathering together later for a delicious dinner.

Day 6

Tuesday 11th November

Monfragüe National Park – Trujillo – Belen plains.

The day started with heavy rain falling. We changed our plan and tried to head away from the rain clouds but the weather seemed to be general and the wet weather stayed with us till late morning. We had breakfast at the usual time and then set off, heading north through Trujillo onto the motorway, taking the exit at junction 21 which leads to the village of Saucedilla. Unfortunately it was heavy rain all the way so we looked for a sheltered area and made a diversion into Monfragüe National Park from the north entrance. The rain seemed to have eased off a bit by the time we arrived at Portilla del Tietar from where we had great views of wet Griffon and Cinereous Vultures standing on the massive crags trying to dry their wet plumages. We also had great views of Iberian Magpies moving in large groups. We continued our drive on the bendy road through the park making a quick stop to try for the elusive Thekla Lark and we were rewarded with great views of a pair of them, alongside good views of Sardinian and Dartford Warblers. After a coffee break in Villareal de San Carlos, we make another stop at Peña Falcon to enjoy this wonderful rock formation, home to many interesting species. We were once again surrounded by dozens of Griffon Vultures and also Cinereous Vultures, Northern Ravens and other passerines such as Blackcap, Robin, Blackbird, Black Redstart, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, Blue and Great Tits, and great views of a pair of very active Firecrest.

A few drizzly showers took us to the afternoon and we drove to Trujillo where we enjoyed of a nice lunch in the main plaza enjoying the highlights of the ‘city of the conquistadors’. We had a stroll around its castle which showed us the reason why this small town was very important during medieval times due to its location.

In the afternoon the weather improved so we continued with our birding, this time driving to the Belen Plains where, despite our efforts, very little was spotted as it was fairly quiet.

We then returned to our lodge to allow everyone time to make preparations for our early departure to Madrid airport the following morning. We enjoyed our drinks and nibbles, followed by a beautiful, but sadly last, dinner together!

Day 7

Wednesday 12th November

Trujillo – Madrid airport – London Heathrow

After an early breakfast we loaded our luggage and belongings before saying a sad “adios y muchas gracias” to Belen and Juan Pedro for looking after us in their lovely finca throughout the week. We then set off towards Madrid. The motorway made for a smooth drive. We had a stop halfway for a coffee and to use the facilities, then continued without any problems to Madrid-Barajas Airport arriving in time to catch our flight.

Once at London Heathrow we said our ‘goodbyes’ and wished our very best to each other. We had fond memories of the wonderful time we had spent together ‘wintering’ for seven days in the vast and beautiful Extremadura!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November						
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓		h			
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			✓				
4	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				h	✓		
5	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓	✓			
6	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				✓			
7	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			✓				
8	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				✓			
9	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓			
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓	✓			
13	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>						✓	
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓	✓	✓		
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓					
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓			
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>				✓			
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		✓	✓		✓		
25	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>					✓		
26	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			h	h			
27	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				✓			
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				h			
29	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓	✓			
30	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓		✓				
31	Eurasian Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>			✓				
32	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>			✓				
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓			
35	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
36	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓	✓			
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
38	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			✓	✓	✓		
39	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		✓					
40	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		✓					
41	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			✓		✓		
45	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
46	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓				

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			6	7	8	9	10	11	12
48	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
49	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				h		✓	
50	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
53	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
54	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓		✓	
56	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓		✓	
57	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>				✓			
58	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓	✓				
59	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>						✓	
61	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		h					
62	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓		✓	
63	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
64	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>					✓		
65	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			h	h			
66	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		h	h		h		
67	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
68	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			✓				
69	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			✓	✓			
70	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				✓	✓	✓	
71	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓	✓			✓	
72	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
73	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>						✓	
74	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		h		h		✓	
75	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				✓			
76	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓			
77	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓				✓	
80	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						✓	
81	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>				✓			
83	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
84	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				✓	✓	✓	
86	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓	✓				
88	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓				
89	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓	✓			
90	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			✓				
91	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
95	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓				✓	
96	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
97	Citril Finch	<i>Carduelis citrinella</i>				✓			
98	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓	✓			✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	November						
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12
99	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Mammals

1	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>			✓				
2	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓			
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>						✓	

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Spanish Terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>		✓		✓			
2	Iberian Water Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>		✓					

Butterflies

1	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓	✓		
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓			✓	
3	Southern Small White	<i>Pieris mannii</i>		✓		✓			
4	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓					
5	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓					