



# ORIOLE BIRDING



## TOUR REPORT EXTREMADURA 11<sup>TH</sup> – 15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2016

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## MONDAY 11<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY – *Fresh southerly winds and sunny spells, 10C*

After an early start at London Gatwick Airport, we departed on time at around 0740 for our morning flight to Madrid. Transit through the airport and car hire collection was straightforward, and after two laps of the car hire complex we found our way out onto the motorway network. Our route took us south-west of the city on the E90 Motorway towards Talavera and on towards Navalmoral de la Mata, and on the way we soon began seeing familiar birds of the region such as Red Kite, Common Kestrel, Common Buzzard, White Stork and Cattle Egret. After about 1.5hrs driving, and when well clear of the city, we made a stop for lunch at a roadside services where Crested Lark and European Griffon Vulture were seen around and over the car park. After a welcome lunch, we continued on our way with a birding stop in mind near Saucedilla at the edge of Embalse de Arrocampo Almaraz. This second leg of the journey began producing roadside Corn Bunting, Southern Grey Shrike, a stunning Black-winged Kite hovering beside the motorway and a brief immature Spanish Imperial Eagle, drifting over the fields close to the road on our left hand side – we only saw it briefly and of course couldn't stop. Just around Navalmoral, two large groups of Common Cranes were seen, feeding among the cork and holm oak trees of the dehesa – a sight we would see more of during the next few days. Once off the motorway at Saucedilla, we parked at the small Ornithological reserve car park at the edge of the village and spent an hour or so birding around the small marshy pools, reedbeds and fields at the edge of the embalse. Corn Bunting were common, and we saw plenty of Crested Lark, Meadow Pipit, Common Stonechat and White Stork in the vicinity. There were plenty of wintering Common Chiffchaffs around too, and we saw our first Black Redstart and Zitting Cisticola too – the latter perching nicely on the fence. A Penduline Tit could be heard calling in the reeds, and with a little persuasion, it came and perched in the open long enough for most people to scope it – a fine male. Singles of Northern Shoveler and Common Teal, Southern Grey Shrike and European Hoopoe [distant] were also noted, and a small party of Spanish Sparrows included one nicely marked male. In the skies above, two large raptors circled into view – their rectangular wings and uniform dark plumage denoted them to be Black Vultures, one of the regional specialities of Extremadura. As we watched them gain height over the village, four European Griffon Vultures circled up to join them, allowing for excellent comparisons to be made in excellent light. We spent some time scanning the reeds for Purple Swamp-Hen, which we could hear calling but not see – two Common Sandpipers, Common Snipe and Little Grebe were noted and a Marsh Harrier drifted over the reeds. Retracing our route, we looked again unsuccessfully for the Penduline Tit but over the fields beyond, not one but two Black-winged Kites were hunting! We watched these superb birds for some time, hovering and even occasionally perching on the fence posts. At one point they tussled mid-air in an owl-like fashion, before eventually being joined by a much smaller Common Kestrel and making their way off over the fields – great views! We still had time for one more good bird though as two Purple Swamp-hens finally gave themselves up and allowed us to get a scope on them as they clambered around in the top of the sedges. Single Great White and Little Egret were noted as we left the area and headed back up to the motorway, completing the final 45 minutes on to our accommodation near Trujillo. Not a bad start to the tour, and what better way to round it off than an excellent meal of Extremaduran dishes and a glass of local wine around a roaring log fire!

## TUESDAY 12<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY – *Sunny in light winds, 15C*

A superb full day birding the steppe and dehesa of Extremadura today started at first light as we headed off towards Trujillo and onto the plains to the North-west of the town. On the minor road to Santa Marta de Magasca, we stopped at the first opportunity and were soon watching our first Little Bustards – four birds crouched on the skyline. As the sun got up, they were illuminated nicely as they began to move around and feed – a great start! Southern Grey Shrike was common here and we had two birds singing just behind our parking place, frequently chasing one another back and forth across the road. A big flock of Calandra Larks and Spanish Sparrows were feeding on one of the areas of cultivated steppe and there were a few Northern Lapwings dotted around. Just along the fence in front of us, superb male Dartford Warbler showed very well. Heading further along the road, we had superb views of a Zitting Cisticola, and stopping for this gave us a chance to scan the stony steppe to our right. Immediately we spotted a cluster of blobs along the ridge – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse! The

light was superb and we had magnificent views of fifteen birds through the scope, the males looking truly dazzling in the morning sun. Common Stonechat, Corn Bunting and Crested Lark were now ubiquitous in this area, as we took a track off the road and began exploring further. Big flocks of Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Common Linnets were noted, and several each of Red Kite and Common Buzzard. Our main target here though was Great Bustard, and a real treat was in store! A flock of over twenty birds were settled in a cereal field very close to the track, and we didn't spot them until almost upon them. Carefully reversing back up the track, we quietly disembarked and watched them through the scope for several minutes – fantastic! Our efforts not to flush them were in vain as it turned out, as a very large dog emerged from the adjacent Finca and ran straight at them. We watched agog as they took flight and lumbered low over our heads – what an amazing sight! A Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over us calling, and hardly earned a second glance, but once the excitement of the bustards had died down, we continued along the track to see if we could find it. We ended up seeing eight Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the ground, but they were distant, and good flight views of a further three. A small flock of European Golden Plover were also noted in the process.



Dartford Warbler and Great Bustards, Santa Marta de Magasca 12<sup>th</sup> January

Back at the road we continued towards Santa Marta de Magasca, spotting four Eurasian Griffon and two Black Vultures circling low by the road as we passed. Slowing down to view them, we realised there was a carcass in a field close by and a congregation of vultures were feeding there! The birds were really close to the road, and not bothered by us at all, coming and going, squabbling and feeding as we watched from no more than 150m distant. To compare the two species on the ground at such close range was a new experience for all of us. Approaching the village of Santa Marta, another impromptu stop produced superb views of singing male European Serin, two Woodlark and a pair of Crag Martins which were swooping low over the houses. Time was already wearing away though, and as we reached the crossing of the Rio Almonte just before Monroy, we decided to stop for lunch. We didn't see too much here other than more Griffon Vultures passing over, a few Common Chiffchaffs and a European Robin, but we did enjoy the warm sunshine and a Clouded Yellow butterfly!

Once past Monroy, with its nesting White Storks and clutch of wintering House Martins, we turned towards Torrejon el Rubio and stopped by the roadside below a stand of Stone Pines. Here more bill-clapping White Storks were seen, and a short session scanning the skies produced a fine subadult Golden Eagle. Many small passerines were among the Holm Oaks and Olives – Chaffinch, Great and

Blue Tits, Sardinian Warbler, Song Thrush and a single Hawfinch. North of the town of Torrejon, the road winds down across the Arroyo de la Vid and then to the edge of Monfrague National Park – here we took the track up to the Castillo and took a walk up the steps to the fantastic viewpoint at the top. Here Griffon Vultures numbered hundreds and many were passing us at eye level or even down below us – always a great experience. A Blue Rock Thrush was briefly on the castle keep, and the wooded slopes below held another Hawfinch, Black Redstart, Blackcap and other common species. A male Sardinian Warbler was noteworthy for the excellent views it gave, and a Short-toed Treecreeper was singing and showing well just by the parking area as we arrived back at the vehicles.



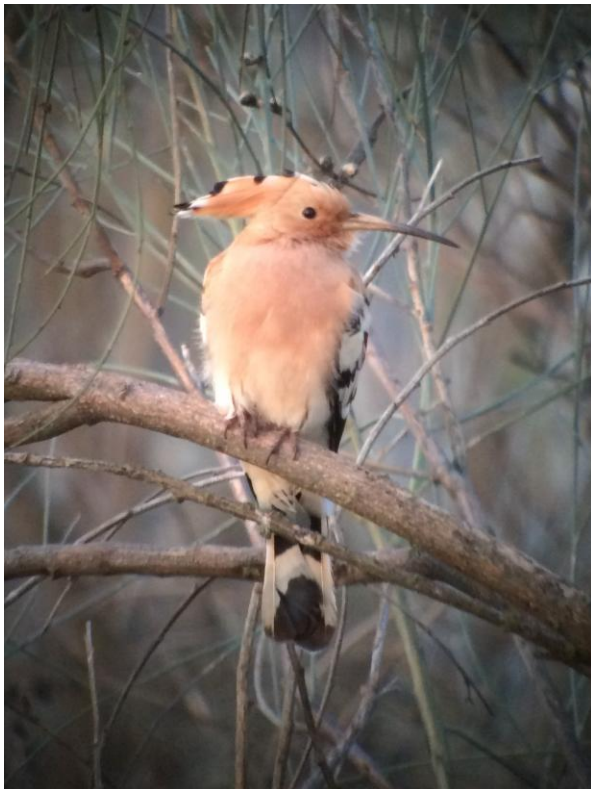
Griffon and Black Vultures, Santa Marta road 12<sup>th</sup> January

Our journey back was more straightforward than the circuitous morning route, and took us directly back to Trujillo. A super party of Common Cranes were close to the road on the way, and with time on our side we made one more stop where the Ex-208 sweeps down across the Rio Almonte – a beautiful spot made all the more pleasant by the warm afternoon sun. Two Black Redstarts included a fine male, and there were Corn Buntings, Crested Larks, Common Chiffchaffs and Common Stonechats all around. With three Griffon Vultures over the ridge, another large raptor appeared – an *aquila* eagle showing broad wings and solid dark colouration. It looked good for an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle, and with the scope soon trained on it the bird banked and flashed its snow-white upperwing coverts – hooray! Some of the group managed to scope it, but it soon drifted away, and while it remained on view for a good ten minutes, it was always extremely distant. The journey back from here was made without stopping and we arrived back at the hotel around 1715. Before dinner, we enjoyed two excellent tasting sessions – the first of local olive oils, and the second of some of the regions fine wines. A great way to end a top day in the field!

#### WEDNESDAY 13<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY – *Sunshine and light winds, 14C*

Today we headed south, to the low-lying area of cultivated land south of Zorita, and in particular the Embalse de Sierra Brava where we arrived shortly after first light. Common Cranes were very much on the menu this morning, and while numbers in this area are low this year presumably due to milder conditions further north, they could still be seen and heard throughout our time here. Several small flocks were taking flight from their roosting spots and passing over us bugling as they searched for feeding locations among the harvested fields of maize and rice. From the dam, we had super views of a Eurasian Hoopoe [perched at last!], and were able to scan the vast flocks of ducks on the reservoir. These included some five thousand Northern Shoveler, with smaller quantities of Gadwall, Common Teal, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon and Mallard admixed. Great Crested and Little Grebes and Lesser Black-backed Gull could also be seen, and several Marsh Harriers were quartering the area. Crossing the dam, we followed the service road towards the adjacent ricefields, noting a couple of Green Sandpipers in the irrigation channel, a flock of Spanish Sparrows, Southern Grey Shrike and an

obliging party of Azure-winged Magpies. Dropping down to the ricefields, we bumped into a couple of mobile groups of the introduced Red Avadavat, many Crested Larks, Meadow Pipits, Common Stonechats, Cattle and Little Egrets and White Storks. Parking up, we then went on foot along one of the ditches to look specifically for one of our target birds – Bluethroat. Small numbers of the white-spotted form winter here, breeding during summer high on the Gredos Mountains to the north, but they can be tough to find. Many Common Chiffchaffs were sallying along the ditch, a Zitting Cisticola was noted and one of the flooded paddies held two Green Sandpipers and a Black-winged Stilt. At the end of the track, an excellent looking spot where a reed-fringed ditch bordered a wet rice paddy came up trumps as a male White-spotted Bluethroat appeared on a fence with a male Common Stonechat and a flock of Spanish Sparrows. After initially being skulking, we found a good position and stood quietly – the bird eventually dropped down and began feeding among the harvested rice stubble, down to about ten metres at times, and even flicking up regularly onto the fence. A star bird!



Eurasian Hoopoe and Bluethroat, Madrigalejo 13<sup>th</sup> January

After coffee and some of Belen's delights for morning snack, we continued on to the village of Madrigalejo and then to neighbouring Vegas Altas. Common Cranes were all along the route, and Red Avadavat flocks taunted us with their incredibly skittish behaviour – eventually, with patience, we had some decent views. A single Common Greenshank was seen on one of the floods and a superb male Hen Harrier flew up from the ground and ghosted among a party of Cranes before heading off over the fields. We wound our way back towards the main road, seeing a couple more Eurasian Hoopoes, another Bluethroat, Sardinian Warbler, Southern Grey Shrike and Spotless Starlings, and from here we headed to our lunch stop to the north at Alcollarin. Our route took us across a lovely area of steppe near Campo Lugar, and while we didn't see any bustards or sandgrouse in the area, we did get very lucky as an impromptu stop for a roadside Common Kingfisher along a small stream led to the discovery of six Stone Curlews in a field! We jumped out and scoped the birds – also noting a migrating flock of White Storks over the ridge beyond – our third such flock of the trip and a sign that spring is around the corner here already!

Embalse de Alcollarin is a new reservoir, but it is not a concrete sided wasteland – instead it is one of the premier birdwatching spots in Extremadura! Bursting with wintering wildfowl, it is not only a beautiful spot surrounded by dehesa, but a very productive one too. Starting at the east end, we had

lunch in the company of European Serins and Long-tailed Tits around the picnic spot, and could scan the separate lagoon which was a superb spot. Little and Great White Egrets, White Storks and Eurasian Spoonbill were among the larger water birds, while a flock of Tufted Duck and Common Pochard came up trumps for us with the wintering female Ring-necked Duck present amongst them. This bird had been around a while, but it was still great to catch up with it, and in excellent light too. Then amongst the same flock we picked up three Ferruginous Ducks including two fine drakes – not a common bird in Extremadura and in fact the first we had ever recorded on tours here. Moving back along the service road, we scanned the east arm of the reservoir where thousands of Common Coot and other wildfowl included a flock of Egyptian Geese, several Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall and Northern Shoveler. On the stony slope just below us, we had extremely good views of two Thekla Larks, always a subtle and difficult species to pin down – we were convinced enough by their black-streaked breasts and thick bills, but were happy to see their grey underwings too just to be sure!

The sun was shining and we were really enjoying ourselves, and with plenty of the day left we decided to head east a bit to the Sierra las Villuercas near Guadalupe, a range of rocky hills that bring a slightly different range of birds amid some stunning scenery. We headed directly for a spot used recently by our spring tour group to the area, to look for Bonelli's Eagle, and set up our scopes overlooking some dramatic craggy peaks. A Golden Eagle was soon observed displaying over the far hillside, and went on to out in three or four appearances over the next hour, but other than many Eurasian Griffon Vultures on the wing it turned out to be the bushes that held the big money! First a Crested Tit showed superbly in the bushes just in front of our watchpoint, and this was shortly followed by an obliging Short-toed Treecreeper and a more difficult Firecrest which eventually everyone connected with. Then, totally out of the blue, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker appeared and spent the next half an hour on and off giving incredible views, feeding in the open among sunny branches of the small oak trees just below us – stupendous views and for most of us the best we had probably ever had, mainly due to the length of time the bird remained on show. A European Nuthatch joined it briefly at one point, but was struggling to get a second glance! A Blue Rock Thrush popped up on the crag above us, in typical pose poking its head above the parapet, and then a stunning Rock Bunting was picked up as it dropped in calling by the armco barrier at the roadside. Thankfully it flew out from among the bushes there and perched beautifully in the open in the sun for all to see in the scope – a stunning bird to round of a remarkably varied days birding in Extremadura.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Sierra las Villeucas 13<sup>th</sup> January

THURSDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY – *Low cloud and rain, 10C*

With such a productive couple of days already under the belt, we had one major target bird today which saw us start the day by travelling one hour west to the small town of Montanchez. Here a ruined Castillo sits atop the town on a rocky outcrop and provides a winter home for one or two

Alpine Accentors each year. We arrived into low cloud shrouding the whole town and our hearts sank a little – it was basically like birding in dense fog and meant visibility was only a few metres at best. Still a super male Blue Rock Thrush and showy Sardinian Warbler on the way up to the Castillo gave us hope, and a Eurasian Hoopoe flicked out from below the castle walls. Over the next hour and a half, we walked up and down the ruins, watching down as best we could onto the rocky slope below. It was cold and very windy, and the fog made life extremely difficult – not a pleasant experience really! We heard an Alpine Accentor call and saw two birds fly over a wall and down the slope, but for an hour we didn't see them again. We were just at the point of giving up when one popped up right in front of us! In the murk, this superb little bird was amazingly easy to lose against the mossy rocks, but with patience everyone had a very good view. Coffee and cake was taken in celebration and for warmth in equal measure!



Alpine Accentor, Montanchez by John Fisher

With our target in the bag, we could relax for the rest of the afternoon and revisit some of the steppe areas further north where we had started out on Tuesday. In particular, we wanted to return to the drovers track on the Santa Marta road, because a Sociable Lapwing had been sighted there in recent days – a rare vagrant from Asia found by a visiting British birder a short time ago. The area is vast, and there are a lot of Lapwings dotted around, but with helpful knowledge from local birder Martin Kelsey we at least knew which field it *had* been in. We stopped along the road just before the track, as the Calandra Lark flock was more obliging than previously and was feeding in the open by the roadside – about fifty birds altogether. A huge flock of Spanish Sparrows were also here, quite staggering to see such large numbers of sparrows carpeting the ground. Taking the track, we saw a car parked up in the rain and found it to be a Spanish birder who had made the trip down from Madrid to try and connect with the lapwing. He had not seen it in a three hour vigil – this was not going to be easy! We scanned the fields but it was raining hard, so we stayed in the vehicles and ate lunch. Just as the weather eased, our Spanish friend leapt from his vehicle exclaiming that he had the bird, and sure enough there it was, running round among the cattle! It took flight a short distance, flashing its white trimmed wings and tail, but then settled to feed and we were able to scope it for some time. Eight Great Bustards in the opposite field struggled for our attention in the meantime! We didn't see much else along the track apart from a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes, a male Hen Harrier

in the distance and a big flock of Spotless Starlings, but we did get our best views so far of about fifty Azure-winged Magpies back up at the road junction. The birds were moving through the cork oaks in typical fashion, but pausing long enough on the ground for everyone to get super views.

We continued along the route towards Monroy, as we wanted to revisit the Rio Almonte crossing to look for rocky hillside birds. First we paused at the Rio Magasca crossing, where a Cirl Bunting flew up from the roadside but sadly, we could not relocate it. A Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and a couple of Crag Martins provided compensation. Reaching the Rio Almonte, it was raining hard, so we decided to continue to Monroy itself and stop in the bar there for a coffee, to warm up and wake up before having one last try! Back at the river, the rain had eased, so we took a walk along the bank downstream of the bridge mainly to look for Cirl Bunting. European Serin, Black Redstart, Grey Wagtail, a flock of Crag Martins and many Common Chiffchaffs were seen, plus a lovely Rock Bunting which perched in a dead tree above us. As the Rock Bunting flew across the river, it was joined briefly by a Cirl Bunting and some people managed a look at it in the scope before it flew off. On the other side of the bridge, a confiding Thekla Lark was in typical habitat and gave some good views, rounding off a soggy afternoon. We headed back to base, an amazing flock of over two hundred Azure-winged Magpies being the highlight of the journey back.

#### FRIDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY – *Mist, light winds, IIC*

Our final morning presented us with a little time for birding en route to Madrid for our afternoon flight back to London. After saying adios to Juan Pedro and Belen, we made our way to nearby Madronera and took the track towards Belen Plain to look again for steppe birds. However, the mist closed in on us and it was a struggle to see very far, and we soon turned back. A very nice Eurasian Hoopoe feeding by the roadside, a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes and a Little Owl, our first of the trip, were the main species of note. Returning to the EX-208 we headed up to Trujillo and picked up the motorway to begin our journey north-east towards Madrid, but we had one planned stop on the way at Embalse de Arrocampo Almaraz. Here at the causeway, we had some good views of three Purple Swamp-hens, our first Cetti's Warbler, a Black Redstart, Zitting Cisticola and Great White Egret. The highlight, however, were the four Penduline Tits which showed really well, feeding on bulrush just by the causeway. This was about all we had time for though, and we drove on for two hours, making a coffee and comfort stop before reaching the Madrid ring road. We made it on time to the airport just before 2pm and dropped off the vehicles, discovering then that the flight was delayed by about an hour. We eventually got back to London Gatwick around 1930.

#### SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Cattle Egret
5. Great White Egret
6. Little Egret
7. Eurasian Spoonbill
8. Grey Heron
9. White Stork
10. Greylag Goose
11. Egyptian Goose
12. Eurasian Wigeon
13. Gadwall
14. Common Teal
15. Mallard
16. Northern Pintail
17. Northern Shoveler
18. Common Pochard



19. Tufted Duck
20. Ring-necked Duck
21. Ferruginous Duck
22. Black-shouldered Kite
23. Red Kite
24. Eurasian Griffon Vulture
25. Black Vulture
26. Marsh Harrier
27. Hen Harrier
28. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
29. Common Buzzard
30. Spanish Imperial Eagle
31. Golden Eagle
32. Common Kestrel
33. Red-legged Partridge
34. Common Moorhen
35. Purple Swamp-Hen
36. Common Coot
37. Common Crane
38. Great Bustard
39. Little Bustard
40. Stone Curlew
41. Black-winged Stilt
42. European Golden Plover
43. Northern Lapwing
44. Sociable Lapwing
45. Common Snipe
46. Green Sandpiper
47. Common Sandpiper
48. Common Greenshank
49. Lesser Black-backed Gull
50. Yellow-legged Gull
51. Black-headed Gull
52. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
53. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
54. Rock Dove
55. Stock Dove
56. Woodpigeon
57. Collared Dove
58. Little Owl
59. Common Kingfisher
60. Lesser-spotted Woodpecker
61. Great-spotted Woodpecker
62. Eurasian Hoopoe
63. Calandra Lark
64. Crested Lark
65. Thekla Lark
66. Woodlark
67. Skylark
68. Crag Martin
69. House Martin
70. Meadow Pipit
71. White Wagtail
72. Grey Wagtail
73. Wren

74. Alpine Accentor
75. European Robin
76. White-spotted Bluethroat
77. Black Redstart
78. Common Stonechat
79. Blue Rock Thrush
80. Blackbird
81. Song Thrush
82. Mistle Thrush
83. Redwing
84. Zitting Cisticola
85. Cetti's Warbler
86. Sardinian Warbler
87. Dartford Warbler
88. Blackcap
89. Common Chiffchaff
90. Firecrest
91. Long-tailed Tit
92. Blue Tit
93. Great Tit
94. Crested Tit
95. Penduline Tit
96. Short-toed Treecreeper
97. Southern Grey Shrike
98. Azure-winged Magpie
99. Black-billed Magpie
100. Western Jackdaw
101. Common Raven
102. Common Starling
103. Spotless Starling
104. House Sparrow
105. Spanish Sparrow
106. Red Avadavat
107. Chaffinch
108. European Serin
109. Greenfinch
110. Goldfinch
111. Common Linnet
112. Hawfinch
113. Rock Bunting
114. Cirl Bunting
115. Corn Bunting

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