

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura
31 March – 7 April 2012

Guide: Mark Denman

Guests: Sue Aldam, Alison & Robert Edwards, Jane & Mark Fisher and David King

Day 1: We all meet up at Gatwick, save for David who is making his way by train, and after a slight delay we're off to Spain on our Extremaduran adventure! We make up a bit of time on the flight and are met by a grinning David in the arrivals hall and after a quick bite to eat we load the van and start making our way south west to Trujillo. Spotless Starlings, Magpies and Common Kestrels are the first birds we encounter on the busy ring-road around Madrid and as we leave the hustle and bustle of the big city we start seeing our first Black Kites and White Storks.

A brief comfort stop adds Crested Lark and Spanish Sparrow to the list and we get super views of a White Stork in a nearby field. On the remainder of the journey we see lots of Cattle Egrets, (some with Cattle!) along with some distant Griffon Vultures and a pale Booted Eagle.

Juan Pedro welcomes us to our lovely hotel, Vina Las Torres and as we unload the van we see our first Azure-winged Magpies, amidst a soundtrack of Hoopoe, Serin and Goldfinch. After a delicious first dinner we have a quick chat about our plans for the week and admire a handsome Stripeless Treefrog on the wall before heading to bed, excited by what awaits us tomorrow!

Day 2: With rain in the night and more promised for the day we have a change of plan and head for an area of steppe and farmland in search of our first Bustards and Sandgrouse. After breakfast and a quick look at the local Azure-winged Magpie population we set off, making a brief stop at the bullring just outside the town of Trujillo. A few Lesser Kestrels that nest in a colony under the tiles of the bullring are drifting above us with Pallid Swifts very high above them. Spotless Starlings noisily chatter away and on a little area of water we find a few Little Grebes amongst the Mallard and Coot and a very smart 'Iberian' Yellow Wagtail. Black-winged Stilts tower above a couple of Little Ringed Plovers and Alison points out a Hoopoe flying across the water.

Moving on to an area of steppe and farmland we set up scopes and start scanning. Both Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrike are close by and in no time at all Sue finds our first Great Bustards amongst some cattle. A few smart male Little Bustards are a little closer and look great through the scopes. A little further on another scan produces our first beautiful Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, the lovely viewing conditions allowing all the

intricate plumage details to be seen, and when they take to the wing we count 29 of these gorgeous birds. WOW!

The air is a heady mixture of Lark song, the short explosive phrases of Short-toed, melodious Crested and the ecstatic buzzy longer song of the powerful looking Calandra Larks. A coffee amongst the Holm Oaks provides super views of Woodchat Shrike and several Woodlarks, although the latter prove rather more difficult to see! Driving a nearby dirt track produces lots of small birds, the aforementioned lark species, Meadow Pipits and some good flight views of Great Bustards. A Midwife toad is popular with the photographers and making our way back to the road we see a couple of Northern Wheatears, a splendid Great Spotted Cuckoo that poses very obligingly, and our first really good look at a fantastic male Montagu's Harrier.

We have lunch by a picturesque river, the soundtrack here very different with scolding Sardinian Warblers and the curious croaking of Iberian Marsh Frogs. Crag Martins are hawking all around and amongst the Griffon Vultures high overhead we pick out something different. It clearly has a much longer tail and we are thrilled when it goes into its characteristic switchback display. We watch the male Golden Eagle for a good few minutes before it drifts away high on a thermal - great stuff!

We've scarcely got our breath back when Mark, who is on the bridge trying to get a shot of the Crag Martins, finds an Otter down below! We all scurry over to the bridge and most of us manage brief views of this charismatic mammal before it slinks out of sight round the corner! With the excitement and lunch over with we set off again to an area known as 'Monty' junction. A colony of Montagu's Harrier nest here but sadly we're a little early and only see one male bird, but great views of Griffon Vulture and some nice Wall Lizards provide some compensation.

Our final stop of the day is at an area where we have seen the rare Black-shouldered Kite in the past and while enjoying a cup of tea and photographing the local White Stork colony Mark nips down the track to see if he can locate one of these charismatic little raptors. The rain has now finally arrived, but we don't mind when a splendid Black-shouldered Kite puts on a great show for us flying, perching and hunting in the now terrible conditions and we head back to Vina Las Torres a little wet but very happy after a great first day.

Day 3: With poor weather forecast again we're pleasantly surprised by the sunny weather that greets us. A quick rummage under some stones at the front of the hotel produces a pretty Marbled Newt and a not quite so pretty Natterjack Toad. We're soon on our way in search of some of the special birds of this wonderful part of Spain. We've not travelled far when Alison spots two birds sitting on a roadside fence, Great Spotted Cuckoos can be tricky to catch up with so we pull in and enjoy fantastic views of these

tormentors of the two Magpie species, Mark and David getting some great photos, and with a Zitting Cisticola posing nearby its a great start to the day.

Next we try a little track that can be good for a number of steppe species and on a pile of rocks where we've often seen Little Owl we find a Rabbit - probably harder to see in Extremadura than Little Owl! David sees some Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight that appear to land in the edge of a field and we soon locate these skulking birds and enjoy their cryptic plumage, they really are very hard to see as they creep around this scrubby habitat. Before we move on a nice male Marsh Harrier drifts past and Mark flushes a Hare that runs right past us. We can see some Great Bustards a little further on including a displaying male so we try to move a little closer for a better look. There are several females there as well but frustratingly they soon move over the brow of the hill, and with coffee time fast approaching we head further south.

The plan now is to go to a nice little cafe but, as so often happens our plans get hi-jacked! We're driving through an area that is very good for Roller but its a little early in the season so we're delighted to see one of these amazingly colourful birds sitting on a roadside wire. We manage to pull off the road and soon find a second Roller even closer - they look fantastic in the scope and even better in flight as they move to some nearby trees.

After a coffee and comfort stop we check some nearby pools that can be very good for Egrets and Herons. There doesn't seem to be any here but we're delighted to find a Glossy Ibis by the side of the road, a real surprise bonus bird. At the Sierra Brava reservoir there are lots of Coot and Mallard and careful scanning reveals one Black-necked Grebe amongst a big number of Great Crested Grebes. The sweet song of Thekla Lark fills the air and we're very pleased to find a pair of beautiful Black-eared Wheatear, the Spanish form of this bird surely a contender for most beautiful Wheatear in the world.

We have lunch by a little river with reed-beds that are full of birds that are frustratingly difficult to see! We do manage brief views of Chiff-chaff, Cetti's Warbler and the ever present Goldfinches, but very vocal Reed Warblers, Nightingales and Penduline Tit remain hidden. Other things here include some flighty Red Avadavats, our first perched Bee-eaters and a pair of very amorous White Storks! The farmland around Vegas Altas produces Tree Sparrow, good views of the little Avadavats, several Harriers and some fly-over Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but its very dry and the hoped for Collared Pratincoles elude us so we decide to head further south to La Serena and 'Pratincole Pond' where Mark has never failed to see these amazing birds!

On arrival we see several waders including Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Lapwing and Green Sandpiper which is a new bird for David. As promised five Pratincoles fly over,

their staccato calls filling the air and they look fantastic in the afternoon sunshine - never in doubt!!!! A little further along the road at a smaller pool we get nice views of more waders including Little Ringed Plover, Common Redshank and another Green Sandpiper. Mark spots a Little Owl on a small pile of rocks and we quickly locate a second bird, but even though they're not that far away the heat haze makes the viewing a bit tricky. Both male and female Monty's Harriers show really well here and on the way back another quick scan of 'Pratincole Pond' reveals two Pratincoles that are preening in one corner and this time we get better views as the haze has reduced a little. Alison brilliantly picks out a passing Stone Curlew but sadly both it and a large group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse land out of sight, though its lovely to hear their bubbling calls. On the way back to the hotel we check Campo Lugar again and see more distant Great Bustards but none seem to be displaying so we head home after another memorable day.

Day 4: We're all up early for a pre-breakfast trip to the Santa Marta Steppes for Bustards and Sandgrouse. It's still fairly dark when we arrive and although we can't see anything it's great to hear all the Lark song. As the daylight increases we pick out a few Little Bustards up the hill and we soon realise that there are lots of these smart birds, perhaps as many as twenty with the males flutter jumping and scrapping for the attentions of the assembled females. After enjoying the Little Bustard show we move on to try and get better views of some Great Bustards that David has spied a little further up the road. Unfortunately they slip away over the horizon but we soon find some more including a male that turns itself almost inside out to impress the females present, it looks like a giant white pom-pom!

A big flock of Black -bellied Sandgrouse fly past but don't land, which is a bit frustrating but there is compensation in the shape of a Fox that David finds for us. On the way back we stop again to admire the Little Bustards which look brilliant in the crisp morning light and we get our closest Great Bustards of the week and fabulous views of a group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse that creep into view, both Bustards and both Sandgrouse before breakfast, can't be bad!

After breakfast we head out again to an area of scrubby low bushes that are very good habitat for warblers. On climbing out of the van we see and hear Thekla Lark and the scolding calls of Dartford Warbler, but the latter prove difficult to see at first. Woodlarks that are both plentiful and vocal continue to tease us but with a little encouragement we get super views of tiny Spectacled Warblers that sing their hearts out and perform their spectacular song flight for us. The walk back to the van produces much better views of Dartford Warblers and good views of a female Sardinian Warbler, but star of the show is the female Cuckoo that sits, posing brilliantly for us at the top of a tree.

We have our lunch by a river and birds here include lots of Stonechats and Chiff-chaffs along with a dashing Kingfisher that flashes past at breakneck speed. As we stroll along the river we flush a few waders including Green Sandpipers and Common Snipe and a Little Egret that keeps trying to land only to be put up by us every few yards! We finally manage views of Woodlark before arriving at the little lake that seems to be crammed full of birds. Stealthily approaching through the Holm Oaks the first bird we notice is a Spoonbill that is feeding on the bank along with lots of Black-winged Stilts. An Avocet is a nice surprise as are the three Spotted Redshanks, one in lovely summer plumage. A couple more Spoonbills fly in and we also find Greenshank and Green Sandpiper feeding busily on the exposed mud. A noisy Short-toed Treecreeper is seen by most as are the assembled water birds including Teal, Gadwall, Little and Great-crested Grebe, but only Mark and Sue are lucky enough to glimpse the Barn Owl that glides away through the trees.

After a bit of time back at the hotel we head out again for dinner in Trujillo, stopping to admire at least 20 Bee-eaters that have assembled on wires just near the hotel with David getting some great shots. Unfortunately by the time we arrive in Trujillo the rain is very heavy so instead of exploring this fascinating old town we enjoy a coffee or a beer before a delicious meal in one of the restaurants in the main square.

Day 5: The day dawns beautiful and sunny and we're all excited by the prospect of spending the day in Monfrague National Park. It's still quite chilly when we arrive at the south entrance to the park and we set up scopes at Pena Falcon. The first Griffon Vultures are leaving the cliffs and look mightily impressive as they soar above us, but its not just big birds that are of interest here with beautiful Blue Rock Thrushes on the cliffs surrounding us as well as smart Black Redstarts and dainty little Subalpine Warblers in the scrub below us. A couple of pairs of Black Storks nest here and they are much in evidence both flying and perched, and we all agree that they look more iridescent green when looked at through the telescopes. We hear a Peregrine calling and see it briefly, but frustratingly it fails to show again, however much more obliging is the female Rock Bunting that is building a nest near the path giving superb views and a great opportunity to get some pictures of this normally skulking bird.

After some refreshments in a wooded glade we walk up onto a bridge to try and get better views of the Alpine Swifts that are dashing overhead. Although rather high at first we can see their white under-parts and how they dwarf the House Martins that they are associating with. A quick scan at a Bonelli's Eagle site produces just more Vultures and Black Kites so we head to the little village of Villareal for lunch.

It's really warming up now and suitably refreshed we set off again for Portilla de Tietar at the far end of the park. This is another really impressive Griffon Vulture colony and a well known site for two of the real star birds of the holiday.

The Eagle Owls that have used these cliffs for many years fortunately for us moved last year to a much more visible ledge and within a couple of minutes we can see a fluffy young bird and the wonderful face, ear tufts and all of the female adult. We've been told that there is only one young bird this year so it is quite a surprise when Sue says that she can definitely see two balls of fluff! We all get fabulous views of these iconic birds and it's amazing to have those beautiful amber eyes staring back at you. A pair of Egyptian Vultures show really well, eventually posing for us at the top of the cliff, but pandemonium breaks out when a superb adult Spanish Imperial Eagle starts patrolling the cliffs right in front of us! With white epaulettes gleaming in the sunshine we get incredible views of what since its split from Eastern Imperial Eagle is the rarest Eagle in the world-amazing!

We get great views of more Black Storks here and find a Great White Egret nearby - quite a rare bird in Extremadura. We decide to have another quick look at the Bonelli's site before dinner and are very pleased when Robert picks one out above the ridge, facing us it circles briefly then slips over the ridge, although much easier to see is a superb Short-toed Eagle that is sitting on a nearby pylon and a Moorish Gecko found by Jane.

After dinner in Villareal we head back to Portilla de Tieter for more looks at the Eagle Owl family and as it's a little cooler now they have moved a little more into view and are showing really well. Once again our attention is hi-jacked by the other star bird of the area when both adult Imperial Eagles appear in front of us, one even landing on the ridge and giving frame filling poses for at least ten minutes! Unfortunately the weather has taken a real turn for the worse and we all cram into a little hide. The Eagle Owl ledge is still visible and in the fading light we can see the adult feeding the two ravenous chicks (with what David thinks looks like a pigeon!) so, with the rain pounding down and the light finally dying away we clamber back into the van and head back to the hotel very happy after a great day in this fabulous place.

Day 6: It's a bit grey as we set off today and the ridges we want to scan are not visible when we arrive at our first stop. Out of the mist we see our first Vultures of the day, both Griffon and Black that appear like ghosts out of the gloom. Another bird then appears with long tail and white flashes in wing and tail - a young Golden Eagle! We watch as it patrols the ridge and disappears into the low cloud and after some shenanigans with a temperamental van door we head off in pursuit! We re-locate the Eagle about quarter of a mile up the road and watch as it puts a few Griffon Vultures in their place - great stuff!

A couple of Jays fly past and we get brief views of Sardinian and Dartford Warblers that tease us from the scrubby bushes. Both Thekla Lark and Woodlark serenade us as we head off to a very picturesque river valley for a cup of tea and some of Belen's

delicious snacks she's given us today. We get a few new birds here, Mark and Jane finding a Great Spotted Woodpecker and most of us see a couple of Grey Wagtails that are going about their business up and down the river, but unfortunately only Mark and Alison connect with the splendid male Cirl Bunting that lands in a dead tree right in front of them. Before going to our lunch spot at the spectacular Cabanas del Castillo we check a well known Bonelli's Eagle site.

We get super views of Short-toed Treecreeper and Mark manages some great shots of Woodlark but we're a bit frustrated that we can only hear Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, Rock Sparrow and Nuthatch. With the eagles failing to co-operate as well we head to the little village of Cabanas and take the short walk up through the winding streets, adding Common Redstart to our list. The view from our picnic spot has to be the most spectacular in Extremadura, though the windy conditions are making the birds rather reluctant to show themselves, though we do see Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush.

We re-try the Bonelli's site after lunch, this time driving a little further and parking under the ridge where they nest. We get good views of a very noisy Nuthatch here and are thrilled to find a splendid Bonelli's Eagle sitting on the ridge high above us - white breast gleaming in the sunshine!

We're going to spend the rest of the day crossing the Belen Plains. Our first stop is at a vulture feeding station and it's an incredible sight to see these huge birds on the ground. All three species are here, the Black Vultures looking absolutely enormous and with Black Kites and a few White Storks trying to get in on the action we have to drag ourselves away if we are to find our main quarry here - Bustards! There are lots of small birds in evidence as we drive the bumpy road including big flocks of Goldfinch and Spanish Sparrow, Meadow Pipits, Corn Buntings and a few Northern Wheatears. Up a very dusty track we find three Great Bustards that are partially hidden in the long grass, but then we see three more much closer and get great views of a splendid male and two females. Sue spots a Short-toed Eagle high above us and then finds us five more Great Bustards amongst some cattle, with two males walking towards each other, though sadly (for us!!) it doesn't come to anything.

We've got a bit of time before dinner so we decide to spend a bit of time in Trujillo as the weather put rather a dampener on things the other night! On the outskirts of the town Mark and David spot a big group of Cattle Egrets next to a small pond so we go back and try to get a few shots. About a hundred or so of these smart birds in breeding plumage are here and look fantastic with their orange head-dress. There are a few waders here too, including a dozen or so Black-winged Stilts, Green Sandpiper and a Little Ringed Plover. The rest of the day is spent in the lovely old part of Trujillo,

some folks walking up to the castle and enjoying the magnificent views - David even getting a photo of our hotel!

Day 7: We're going to spend most of the day in Monfrague again but we take a detour via some wetlands with extensive reed-beds to try and see a few species not really associated with Extremadura. We've not quite reached our destination when our attention is drawn to a large raptor flying low over the town of Almaraz, and there is great excitement when it turns and reveals its identity - Spanish Imperial Eagle! It's a beautiful young bird with lovely two tone wings and we scramble out of the van for a better look, David at least managing some nice record shots, a big surprise and great start to our last day.

We haven't even stopped moving when our next surprise bird shows as a Squacco Heron flies into some nearby reeds. We eventually get nice views of this smart little Heron, even seeing a second one, but only Mark catches the female Little Bittern that flies into some deep cover. It's Good Friday and lots of local fishermen are wading out into the surprisingly warm water but it doesn't seem to put the birds off and we also see lots of Purple Herons in flight as well as a couple of Purple Swamp Hens. Reeling Savi's Warbler is new for everyone and they are much easier to see than the Cetti's, Reed and Fan-tailed Warblers that are also very vocal here. A Marsh Harrier drifts past and a couple of distant Gull-billed Terns are over the water, but with the delights of Monfrague to come we climb into the van and head off, pausing briefly to photograph an obliging Iberian Grey Shrike.

The local photographers are trying to capture some Azure-winged Magpie shots at a picturesque picnic spot but we're not terribly surprised when none show as it's so noisy! Going for a stroll after lunch in a little bit of Pine forest Alison finds some nice close Red Deer, but the hoped for Crested Tits seem a little reluctant to show! A Short-toed Eagle soars overhead and is joined by a nice pale phase Booted Eagle but the sound of a 'crestie' calling from high in a Pine soon has us concentrating on passerines again. With a little competition from Mark's iPod this handsome bird poses rather helpfully at the top of several trees and we all manage pretty good views of his spiky hair-do!

The Eagle Owls are showing very well at Portilla de Tietar again and Jane and Alison find a Mink on the shore below but we're all feeling the cold rather and decide to head for Villareal for a hot drink. Amazingly, by the time we drive round to the little town the sun has come out, the wind has dropped and it's really rather warm, so for most of us the hot drink turns into an ice-cream!

Our final stop of the day is at Pena Falcon. In the now warm sunshine it's a real treat to watch hundreds of Griffon Vultures as they return to their cliffs, many flying below

us over the river, and some so close that the photographers amongst us wish we'd packed our wide angle lenses! David and Mark get good views of a male Subalpine Warbler and Sue finds a male Blue Rock Thrush, and with Black Storks, Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows all around us there is never a dull moment, but it's the Griffons that steal the show, an experience that none of us will forget and a fitting end to another wonderful adventure in Extremadura.

Spanish Imperial Eagle gets two votes for bird of the trip, with other votes going to Serin, Rock Bunting, Bonelli's Eagle, Eagle Owl and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Not surprisingly Pena Falcon is a popular choice for place of the trip, along with our wonderful hotel, Vina Las Torres and the reed-beds at Arrocampo.

Magic moments involved Eagle Owl, Spanish Imperial Eagle the incredible Griffon show and Cirl Bunting. Thanks to all for very sharp eyes and lots of fun, hope to see you all again very soon.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern (DLT)
Squacco Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
White Stork
Gadwall
Mallard
Teal
Black-shouldered Kite
Black Kite
Red Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Buzzard
Short-toed Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Lesser Kestrel
Kestrel
Peregrine
Moorhen
Purple Swamp Hen
Coot
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Green Sandpiper
Greenshank
Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Avocet

Glossy Ibis
Spoonbill
Gull-billed Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Cuckoo
Scops Owl (H)
Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Barn Owl
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Hoopoe
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (H)
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Robin (H)
Nightingale (H)
Black Redstart
Redstart
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler

Reed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Spectacled Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap
Chiff-Chaff
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow (H)
Red Avadavat
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch (DLT)
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Red Deer
Red Fox
Otter
Mink

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Natterjack Toad
Common Toad
Marbled Newt
Moorish Gecko
Stripe-less Tree Frog
Iberian Midwife Toad
Iberian Wall Lizard
Spanish Psammodromus

BUTTERFLIES

Western Dappled White
Holly Blue
Black-eyed Blue
Speckled Wood
Small Heath
Small Copper
Large Tortoiseshell
Spanish Festoon
Cleopatra
Swallowtail