

Holiday Highlights

Extremadura

5 April – 12 April 2014

Guides: Mark Denman and Chrissie Nicholson

Guests: Alan and Patricia Shaw, Anne Turner, Sheila Rogers, Jane Moore, Jess, Alex and Tom Rafinski, Irene and Barry Shaw, Peter Ogden and Jenny Hutchings

Day 1: After an early start at a rather foggy Gatwick we're soon winging our way south to a rather sunnier Madrid. After a painfully slow queue for the car hire we soon leave behind the urban sprawl of the city and start entering an area of gentle farmland, where we start to record our first birds of the holiday. Spotless Starlings are on the wires along with Pigeons and Common Kestrel, but not surprisingly our first Black Kites and White Storks are met with rather more enthusiasm!

At a brief comfort stop we're greeted with the sight and sound of Corn Bunting and Crested Lark, along with a smart Spanish Sparrow and a Whitethroat found by Alex. Our eyes then turn to the skies and can't quite believe what we see when a superb sub-adult, Spanish Imperial Eagle cruises over - the rarest Eagle in the world and we haven't reached the hotel yet! A pale phase Booted Eagle shows well and Peter does very well to pick out a distant Short-toed Eagle - what a start! Driving further south we see more kites and White Storks along with our first Black Vulture of the holiday. We've got a bit of time before we're due at the hotel so we pay a visit to the reedbeds of Arrocampo where our list starts to swell very quickly! A Squacco Heron is a nice surprise and shows very well in the scopes, while the sights and sounds of this rare habitat in Extremadura include Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola and the reeling Savi's Warbler. Marsh Harriers patrol the reedbeds and several Purple Herons show surprisingly well, along with a nice Spoonbill in flight. Eight year old Tom then brilliantly picks out an Egyptian Vulture amongst some passing Griffons (the first of countless great spots by this remarkable little birder) and some close Black Vultures allow us to get to grips with our Vulture ID skills. With time marching on we head for Vina las Torres, our charming hotel and receive a lovely welcome from Juan Pedro and Belen.

After the first of Belen's wonderful meals, in which we're serenaded with Brahms and Mozart by pianist Marina we do our first checklist and go over our plans for the week, all of us excited about what tomorrow may bring.

Day 2: Our first full day dawns absolutely beautiful with an atmospheric mist hanging over nearby Trujillo. Some of us see both Marbled Newt and Yellow Scorpion before breakfast, but only the Newt remains later as we head for the vans. A couple of calling, Common Cuckoos fly past and Peter points out our first Red-rumped Swallow, while Chrissie finds our first Woodchat Shrike. The maniacal calls of a Great Spotted Cuckoo give its presence away and we get great scope views as it poses on a tree and then a nearby fence. We also get our first looks at Hoopoe and Azure-winged Magpie as we pack the vans and all done we head off for our first full day in this wonderful place.

Our first port of call is a ridge that can be good for raptors, but its rather quiet this morning save for some distant Vultures. There are lots of Linnets buzzing around and we see our first Iberian Grey Shrike, along with terrific views of a male Sardinian Warbler. We then move to a delightful river valley for some refreshments. Griffon Vultures pose on the cliffs and we also see a brief and rather scruffy, Short-toed Eagle, along with a perched Kestrel and a Blue Rock Thrush found by Chrissie. Ravens 'cronk' as they pass overhead and we find our first Crag Martins and dashing Alpine Swifts. The warm sunshine is encouraging some butterflies on to the wing and we're pleased to see Brimstone, Cleopatra, Orange Tip, Small Heath, Black-eyed Blue and a couple of superb Spanish Swallowtails. At the picturesque village of Cabanas we get great views of a young Bonelli's Eagle that soars overhead, and with lunches sorted we start walking up through the beautiful little village. Butterflies are again much in evidence with both Small and Large White, along with the rather more exotic Moroccan Orange Tip and Spanish Festoon.

We have our lunch at what must be one of the most spectacular viewpoints in the region, where the birds keep coming thick and fast. It's great to get eye level views of Crag Martins and superb 'yikking' Alpine Swifts, along with our first Black Redstarts and more Blue Rock Thrushes. Alan then picks out a pair of mating Spanish Festoons down below us, and the keen photographers can't resist scrambling down for this rare photo opportunity. Walking back to the vehicles we see and hear more Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes, while young Tom has his eyes on the sky, finding two more Short-toed Eagles. An area just down the road has some most welcome bushes (!) where we see four Black Storks in flight and some careful searching produces an adult Bonelli's Eagle sitting on a ridge. Moving a little closer we hear both Cirl Bunting and Short-toed Treecreeper and manage to find a Nuthatch on a telegraph pole. The Eagle shows well in the scopes, almost shining in the strong sunlight and its Jane who is the lucky one who is looking through the scope as it launches itself into the air and over the ridge, never to be seen again.

We want to spend the remains of our first day driving across the Belen Plains in the hope of encountering our first Bustards and to reach there we pass through a lovely area of Dehesa with a mixture of both Holm and Cork Oak. Our first stop is at a Vulture feeding station where there is a large gathering of both Black and Griffon Vultures on the ground. A Sheep with a newborn Lamb is looking rather nervous in the middle of the throng, in fact we're pretty sure the afterbirth is the focus of the Vultures attention, well that is until a rather large farm dog comes and breaks up the party! A Zitting Cisticola 'zits' nearby and 'eagle-eyed' Tom is at it again, with yet another Short-toed Eagle for us all to enjoy - great stuff! The drive through the heart of the Belen Plains is as birdy as ever with almost uncountable numbers of Corn Buntings and Crested Larks, along with lots of Spanish Sparrows and a few migrant Northern Wheatears. On a large pond we find a couple of Little Grebes and a rather out of place Cormorant, while a few of us glimpse a Little Owl on some abandoned farm buildings.

Driving up a muddy side track we go as far as we dare before a rather large puddle halts us in our tracks. Fortunately a quick scan reveals some splendid Great Bustards amongst a group of sheep, so we climb out quietly and set up the scopes, trying hard not to tread on any of the many Champagne Orchids that are growing in the long grass. The Bustards look superb in the late afternoon light, glowing 'marmalade' orange, except for one male who has almost turned himself inside out into a giant white pom-pom, a display that seems to have little effect on the assembled females, but leaves us decidedly impressed!

Driving back we pause to admire a Tawny Pipit, and can't resist another stop when we find another group of Bustards - this time amongst some cows! Alan points out a couple of close Hoopoes that sadly don't linger, but in trying to relocate them Alex finds another Little Owl, this one posing long enough for all to see in the telescopes. A Calandra Lark shows very well, but sadly our time is up, so we head back to the hotel, for another of Belen's imaginative meals and reflect on what has been a great first day.

Day 3: It's another beautiful day, and after a slightly earlier breakfast we head off to an area that has been very productive for warblers on previous trips. We've hardly got out of the vans when we hear the distinctive song of a Bonelli's Warbler from some trees across the road and as we get nearer a noisy Great Spotted Cuckoo flies past and we hear the lovely flutey song of a Woodlark which temporarily distracts us as it poses at the top of a tree. With a little persuasion the Bonelli's Warbler shows well enough for us to see the diagnostic features that separate it from our more familiar Willow Warbler - a great bird to get this early in April. Walking down a wide track through this

classic 'Sylvia' habitat, we start to hear the scolding calls from several Dartford Warblers, though the light is rather harsh and it's not until we turn off the main path, that we get good views of this beautiful little songster. Iberian Shrikes, Song flighting Thekla Larks, another Woodlark and more Dartford's show very well here but the hoped for Spectacled Warbler fails to show this time.

Back at the vans we get lovely scope views of a Woodchat Shrike and as we leave a Great Spotted Cuckoo flies alongside the vans. We then take a minor road towards Monfrague National park through the beautiful Dehesa and see a group of roadside Bee-eaters which cause an extremely unfortunate distraction, resulting in a collision between the two vehicles. Mercifully no-one is seriously hurt, although the experience does result in painful bruising for some of us from the seatbelts. All very shaken, we're relieved when the emergency services arrive and we would like to thank them for the kind and sensitive way that we are treated, a number of us being checked over later at the medical centre in Trujillo.

It would be highly remiss of me now, not to talk a little about our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. JP was invaluable in helping alert the emergency services and insists on driving to the scene to offer any help and support that he can. Back at the hotel, Belen looks after everyone and at very short notice arranges for us to eat at Vina Las Torres that night - as ever their kindness and generosity of spirit shines through - two finer people, I have yet to meet. We also inform our team back in the UK so they can take over the phone calls and assist in trying to locate replacement vehicles nearer to our accommodation, providing further support to us.

After some quiet recuperation at the hotel some of us go for a short walk down the lanes, this time connecting with Yellow Scorpion, whilst Festoons and Swallowtails zip by, but it's rather hot and this has an effect on the bird life. We do however get nice views of Serin singing its impossibly fast song, Sardinian Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Booted Eagle and some high 'cronking' Ravens. After another wonderful meal we receive the good news that the hire company has found us some replacement vehicles – but the bad news is that Mark and Chrissie will have to go to Madrid in the morning to pick them up, leaving a quiet morning for the group at the hotel and to explore the surrounding area.

Day 4: With Mark and Chrissie whisked away early in the morning by taxi to Madrid the rest of the group have a leisurely morning around the charming lanes near the hotel. Highlights include some lovely Bee-eaters (!!!) mating

Great Spotted Cuckoos and an assortment of other local residents such as Sardinian Warbler, Hoopoe, Woodchat Shrike and Serin.

Arriving back mid-afternoon and suitably refreshed we head out to the plains of Santa Marta de Megasca, for some Steppe birding. A quick stop at Trujillo bullring produces some elegant Lesser Kestrels, part of the colony that nest under the tiles on the roof. At 'Happening corner' Alex finds our first splendid Montagu's Harrier. These most beautiful of raptors are terribly hard to see in Britain but are a common sight here in Extremadura in the summer months. It doesn't take too long to find our main target bird here, a smart male Little Bustard that does its best to hide, but eventually shows reasonably, though a bit distantly. Other delights here include our best views of Iberian Grey Shrike and a flypast from a beautiful rufous form of Cuckoo. Our next stop fails to produce any Sandgrouse, but we do get terrific views of the mighty Calandra Lark and a little further along the road a Dutch birder very kindly points us in the direction of some Black-bellied Sandgrouse - what a nice man!

The rough track we take immediately produces a surprise with a very bright male Whinchat, along with several Short-toed Larks, Wheatear and the usual supporting cast of Crested Lark and the ubiquitous Corn Bunting. Chrissie then finds us a superb male Great Bustard that struts his stuff, but star spot has to go to Peter who finds a Golden Eagle that unfortunately only Mark sees, which is a great shame. The ecstatic song of Calandra Lark, mixed with the more flutey tones of Crested Lark and a host of other species go together to make a rich soundscape that more than matches the visual splendour of this very special place - a peaceful end to a difficult couple of days.

Day 5: It's another glorious day and as we pack the vans we see and hear another Great Spotted Cuckoo, a super bird to start the day with. Our first port of call today is an area of mixed steppe and farmland where we're hoping to see some bustards and Sandgrouse. We pause briefly to admire an Iberian Grey Shrike on a road sign, and on getting out of the vehicles immediately find two male Great Bustards face to face in confrontation. A couple of nearby females seem fairly uninterested, but we enjoy the scene very much! Alan does very well to pick out four Black bellied Sandgrouse, their cryptic plumage making his spot even more impressive. A few raptors put in an appearance such as a small group of hunting Lesser Kestrels, Common Buzzards and a few Marsh Harriers. A couple of Lapwings are a good find at this time of year and we also see a pair of Great Bustards mating. Alex points out a Little Bustard on the horizon and a little further up the road we find another eleven Great Bustards and a much closer group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

Our next stop is at a large reservoir and although a little quiet, we do get lovely views of some perched Red-rumped Swallows, a couple of Little Egrets and a Green Sandpiper. At an abandoned station that resembles something out of a spaghetti western movie the hoped for Roller fails to show, but we do get great views of Hoopoes and Shrikes and after a coffee in a local bar we're back on the road searching for more birds. Vegas Altas is an area of rice fields that provides a winter home for thousands of cranes, but today we're looking for another very special bird that we hear almost straight away when getting out of the vans. The staccato calls of a couple of Collared Pratincoles give away their presence, but they soon slip away, not helped by the fact we're looking into the sun. Fortunately we locate five more of these rather strange looking birds and get prolonged views as they hawk high above us. A nice 'tricolore' male Marsh Harrier shows well and we get our best views of Zitting Cisticola, along with five more Great Bustards spotted by Alan, however just as popular are a couple of Hummingbird Hawkmoths that feed on roadside flowers.

We take our lunch by the river Gargiligas and after marvelling at property that is completely covered by Cattle Egrets, we are greeted by the super croaky song of a Great Reed Warbler, along with Cetti's Warbler and Nightingale. Unfortunately most of us are tucking into our sandwiches when a male Little Bittern shoots under the bridge and only Barry manages to glimpse it as it disappears into the reeds, never to be seen again. A female Pied Flycatcher is a nice bonus, as are a little group of Common Waxbills - an introduced bird from Africa that now have a self-sustaining population along with Indian Red Avadavats. The drive south is very picturesque, crossing a couple of very large reservoirs that look much more like natural lakes, and as we reach La Serena - the biggest grassland in Europe we are reminded of a great African scene.

On a quiet dirt track, we encounter a pale Booted Eagle that looks rather splendid, its comparatively small size not belying the gravitas that a very large bill re-enforces. Fly-by Great Bustards remind us of huge colourful geese and 'Monty's' Harriers are a delight. Roller's once again elude us at the abandoned Station, but we get nice scope views of Bee-eater, Hoopoe and Grey Shrike and just as we're leaving a flying Stone Curlew spotted by Chrissie gives some of us a brief view of this rather odd looking denizen of the steppe.

Day 6: We decide to have a pre-breakfast visit out to Santa Marta de Megasca to look for Bustards and Sandgrouse. It's a lovely cool temperature as we leave, and we head straight to an area that usually holds Sandgrouse. A brief initial scan fails to produce any however, but we do get good views of a couple of Great Bustard

as they fly past. Mark then goes on a quick recce up the road leaving the group to be entertained by displaying Great Bustard and a superb mid-air battle between a Red Kite and an Egyptian Vulture. Fortunately there are about a dozen Pin-tailed Sandgrouse viewable from another viewpoint and they look absolutely gorgeous in the warm morning sunshine, their beautiful orange chests positively glowing! There are vultures, kites and Ravens on a carcass and we are once again treated to symphony of lark song - wonderful. We get closer views from here of the displaying Great Bustard and find more females sitting under some trees, although they still don't pay the giant white pom-pom of a male much attention! Calandra Lark and Stone Curlew show well here and at 'Happening corner' we see Little Bustard and are able to compare the tricky pair of Crested and Thekla Lark.

After a well earned breakfast we head out again, this time back to the reedbeds of Arrocampo. On getting out of the vehicles we hear a very different soundscape to this morning, this time including Savi's, Reed, Great Reed, Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warbler! A couple of Black-winged Stilts fly over the causeway and we get brilliant views of Gull-billed Terns as they fly overhead. We get nice views of Swamphens AKA the purple Chicken and once again it's great to see so many Purple Herons, both in flight and in the flattened area of reedbeds. Lots of distant egrets seem mainly to be of the Cattle variety and Marsh Harriers are very conspicuous. A quick comfort stop at the visitor centre produces lots of Sand Martins and back at the reedbeds we have our lunch - in the company of more Purple Swamphens, a Squacco Heron and a 'barking' Little Bittern. After a very pleasant siesta back at the hotel we head out to Trujillo for our evening meal in the charming Plaza mayor, dominated by the imposing statue of great conquistador Pizarro. Some of us head up to the castle with its magnificent views while others enjoy a drink in the square, birds here including superb White Storks nest building, Lesser Kestrels and an ID challenge of Common and Pallid Swift-great fun!

Day 7: After missing out on going to Monfrague earlier in the week we're all very excited about visiting this wonderful place and the day gets off to a great start with a Peacock Moth on the hotel wall, Europe's biggest moth! Our first stop is at the imposing Pena Falcon, an imposing rock buttress that is covered in vultures. It doesn't take long to find a splendid Black Stork and we all agree that 'Black' doesn't really do it justice - metallic green being more apt. Peregrine Falcons look tiny amongst the enormous Griffons and along with song-fighting Sub-alpine Warblers we get great views of Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting here. Coffee in the shade by the river is notable for both the sky full of 'yikking' Alpine Swifts and some rather tasty cheesecake and after enjoying both of these we make our way up to the bridge that spans the river Tajo.

There are many hundreds of House Martin that nest here and we get spectacular views of the Martins and Alpine Swifts as they sweep past, along with a rather more stately, Black Vulture that cruises by. A little further into the park we get great views of Black and White Stork overhead and follow another Black stork that flies low over the river to its nest on a secluded ledge. New butterflies here include Common Blue and Brown Argus and before we head for our lunch spot Alex spots a Short-toed Eagle.

After lunch in the charming little village of Villarreal we set off again, heading for the far end of the park where we're hoping to find both Imperial Eagle and Eagle Owl. After watching Black Kites picking up dead fish from the river we arrive at Portilla del Tietar and amazingly find a Spanish Imperial Eagle almost immediately! It lands in a nearby tree, then re-locates to the far riverbank and we get sensational views of this stunning bird - now the rarest Eagle in the world! As if this isn't exciting enough we notice some people up the road looking back at the cliffs and on enquiring as to what they are looking at are pointed in the direction of the ledge being used this year by the Eagle Owls. Over the next hour or so, we are treated to incredible views of Eagle Owl and two fluffy chicks, along with even more spectacular views of the Eagles as they bully the rather hapless Griffons! Other highlights here include close views of Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers, singing Rock Bunting and the comings and goings of a major Griffon Vulture colony.

After a very nice evening meal in Villarreal we have our final birdwatching session of the holiday, back at Pena Falcon at the east end of the park. It's very peaceful here, with Griffons effortlessly soaring above us and great fun picking out the odd Booted and Short-toed Eagle that joins in the avian throng above us. Subalpine Warblers song flight from the bushes and the rich flutey song of Blue Rock Thrush echoes around the imposing rock faces and it's with great difficulty and reluctance that we have to drag ourselves away and back to the hotel, a glorious sunset bringing the holiday to a conclusion.

Not surprisingly there were lots of votes for Eagle Owl and Spanish Imperial Eagle with other mentions going to Shrikes, Hoopoes, Rock bunting, Iberian Magpie and Waxbill. Place of the trip was a close run thing with Monfrague just edging out the Rio Almonte and magic moments ranged from Imperial Eagle action, early morning on the steppes, dinner in Trujillo and just spending time around Vina Las Torres.

Our thanks (as always) go to Juan Pedro, Belen and family for making our stay so wonderful and Chrissie and I would like to thank everyone for the fun, great spotting and understanding and we hope to see you all again soon.

Species Lists

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern
Squacco Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Spoonbill
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Black Stork
White Stork
Mallard
Black Kite
Red Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Buzzard
Short-toed Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Lesser Kestrel
Common Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Moorhen
Purple Swamp Hen
Coot
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Green Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove

Feral Pigeon
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Cuckoo
Scops Owl (Heard)
Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Common Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Pied Flycatcher
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Whinchat
Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Whitethroat
Blackcap
Chiff-chaff
Bonelli's Warbler
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit

Penduline Tit (Heard)
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper (Heard)
Iberian Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow(Heard)
Red Avadavat
Common Waxbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Cirl Bunting(Heard)
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Red Deer
Serotine
Pipistrelle sp.

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Strip-necked Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Marbled Newt
Grass Snake
Ladder Snake(DEAD)

BUTTERFLIES

Small White
Large White
Western Dappled White
Swallowtail
Spanish Swallowtail
Spanish Festoon
Cleopatra
Marbled White
Orange Tip
Moroccan Orange Tip
Red Admiral
Large Tortoiseshell
Small Tortoiseshell
Painted Lady
Small Copper Small Heath
Meadow Brown
Holly Blue
Common Blue
Black-eyed Blue
Brown Argus
Speckled Wood.

OTHER STUFF!

Red-striped Oil Beetle
Mole Cricket
Yellow Scorpion
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Peacock Moth