

Extremadura  
Holiday Highlights  
29 March – 5 April 2008

**Leaders:** Ian Rowlands & Mark Denman

**Guests:** Sue, Alan & David Ripley, Lynn & Steve Osborne, Pat & Gordon Humby, Jan & Ray Knott, John Tuke, Tony Edwardes, Denise Chamings

Our first trip of 2008 was again a triumph, enjoying some wonderful hospitality at our special hotel – our hosts Juan-Pedro and Belem were a delight – and we had some fine settled weather (whilst it threatened snow back in England!). Bird highlights were numerous, but a few 'specials' might be: 19 species of raptor including great views of Spanish Imperial and Bonelli's Eagles, a flock of over 15 Montagu's Harriers, plus Black-shouldered Kite; Eagle Owl with chicks; Great and Little Bustards; excellent Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse; Bee-eaters; Western Bonelli's Warbler; Collared Pratincoles; Stone Curlew; Gull-billed Tern; Purple Heron; Purple Gallinule; Little Bittern; plus unexpected Squacco Heron and Spotted Crake. There was a fine haul of butterflies and some truly magical Extremaduran moments that come from our 10 years of experience here. Thanks to all of you for your great company, laughter and enthusiasm, and I hope to see you all again soon.

**Day 1** We all fly from Gatwick mid-morning and, despite a slight delay, our journey to Madrid is a simple process, with just a short flight with good views over the Pyrenees and the Picos de Europa.

The weather is a delight after the cold and wet of Britain, with clear blue skies and warm sun to greet us and an ever-expanding horizon of fields, flowers and wide grasslands scattered with trees – plus our first Swallows! Our first stop is a very welcome refreshment break near Talavera, taken at a service station with a view of Spanish Sparrow, Crested Larks and a distant Montagu's Harrier. Things get even more impressive when we drive just a little to the south and into the farmland where we get our first view of a Great Bustard!

Along the motorway we see White Storks, Cattle Egrets, a few Black Kites and even some Great Spotted Cuckoos, before winding around the edge of hill-top Trujillo we turn south. It's a beautiful sunlit evening and we then turn on to a narrow (now metalled) track and arrive at Hotel Rural Viña las Torres with its impressive colonial-style stone balconies. Beautiful and tranquil, it has a Moorish feel in the courtyard and, as well as a stunning view over the landscape, there's also a very friendly greeting. We get a tour from the owner, Juan-Pedro, and he

helps us to admire the Azure-winged Magpies, Hoopoes and Serins in the gardens. After a change before dinner, we are invited to pre-dinner drinks, where we meet JP's wife, Belem, and their two children, Marina and Alexandro, and then enjoy a very nice dinner with wine and bellota (the locally-made acorn liqueur). Amidst much laughter we make plans for tomorrow, listen to the local Scops Owls and then head for bed.

## Day 2

The clocks change for summer time and it doesn't get light until about 7.45am (though dusk isn't until 9.00pm), so we eat at 8.00am and the House Sparrows are chattering in the courtyard. Our immediate surroundings however are too good to miss and, after a delicious breakfast buffet, we walk in grey cloudy skies around the fields, hedgerows and farmsteads right outside. We find plenty of Hoopoes, Azure-winged Magpies, Red-rumped Swallows in the sky, some Woodchat Shrikes, Red and Black Kites, Sardinian Warbler, Great Spotted Cuckoo and Common Cuckoo, Serins, White Storks, and a couple of Woodlarks. And everywhere there are Corn Buntings in song!

After loading up our packed lunch picnic, and much good humour from our hostess Belem, we depart for the Trujillo bullring – not out of morbid curiosity but rather to enjoy the pan-tiled roof that plays host to some wonderful early morning Lesser Kestrels (giving Alan some photographic opportunities). There are oily-plumaged Spotless Starlings 'on the tiles', plus House Martins in the sky. Then it's a short journey to the river Tozo for a walk in the dehesa. The 'dehesa' is the ancient landscape of holm and cork oaks dotted over unspoilt pasture, farmed in this way by Extremaduran communities for centuries and very reminiscent of African acacia savannah. We find pruned branches left for sheep to nibble before being made into charcoal and see acorns that have been missed by foraging pigs. This year it's a little overcast on our walk but we find Woodlark, Rock Sparrows, Stonechats, and Crested Larks. Flowers include Hooped Narcissus, Barbary Nut, Storksbills and more, and it's a delight to be walking here in the rural tranquillity. We flush a couple of Snipe as we wander along the river Tozo, but the best water birds are on the flooded reservoir amidst the trees where there are Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank, Teal and Gadwall. Notable are Green and Common Sandpiper, plus a Little Ringed Plover, White Wagtail, Blue-headed Wagtail.

Raptors taking to the wing include low Black Kites, Booted Eagles, Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures, in the trees we find Short-toed Treecreeper and a surprise (an elusive Bonelli's Warbler). Heading slowly back it becomes a little drizzly – making a picnic in the vehicles more appealing than one under the trees – and we hear the odd call from a hidden Kingfisher.

Driving on and up over the windy ridges we reach the Belen pseudo-steppe grasslands where the trees give way to the plains. It's quite a contrast and again new things come thick and fast! Black and Griffon Vultures are on the ground near to us, feeding on some small animal remains, there are Ravens, and a cluster

of Magpies draw our attention to a couple of parasitic Great Spotted Cuckoos which give marvellous perched, and fly-by, views. Calandra Larks buzz around in the fields and the sky, plus a Southern Grey Shrike is on a fence-line, whilst our first up-close White Stork's nest – with resident bird sitting on eggs – plays host to some Spanish Sparrows. A ruined farmhouse is host to hawking Lesser Kestrels and on the red, pan-tile roof a Little Owl shelters out of the wind. Further along there are lots more Calandra Larks, a female Montagu's Harrier, and a distant Short-toed Eagle.

Further down the road we connect with the main prize – Great Bustards. In fact we initially see a couple of males sitting out of the wind (we chivy another couple of Great Spotted Cuckoos as we go) on the lee-ward slope of the rolling stony grassland. Eventually these two get up to feed and we enjoy good views of their fine, rich plumage colours, before we regain the road to head back. However, Steve is on the ball and spots four more Great Bustards, close in a thistly meadow, and when we stop we find no less than 29+ birds! What's more, there are also about six Little Bustards too, including some males calling with their heads up – wow. We then find a terrific male Montagu's Harrier, a perched Calandra Lark and plenty of kites and vultures on the wing in the early evening sun. It's time to head for the hotel and another delicious dinner!

**Day 3** Today we get set for our plans to visit spectacular Monfragüe Natural Park, but first our birding day begins after breakfast when, all gathered outside the hotel, we see a Great Bustard fly across high in the sky from west to east – what a start! Of course, that's not all because, as usual, also to be seen are: Red Kite; Azure-winged Magpies; Sardinian Warbler; Spanish Sparrows etc etc “... all the usual rubbish” quip the leaders!

We take the road north through Trujillo and press on through the unspoilt rolling dehesa where there are Black Kites dotted on the holm oaks – it's been cool overnight and isn't yet warm enough for flying – plus Southern Grey Shrikes, Little Egret and White Storks. The rocky ridges of Monfragüe beckon and cool breezes greet us as we arrive at Peña Falcon rock. It's a spectacular sight – a narrow chasm across the River Tajo with pinnacles of rock on either side, both of them busy with birds just taking to the wing ... big birds! It's perfect timing as the sun is warming the sky and Griffon Vultures are floating on the air both above and below us, on 2½ metre wings, there are Egyptian Vultures, Black Kites, and Short-toed Eagles that show really well. Gordon gets onto a Black Stork which wheels in the air and drops onto the crags, there are Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins in the sky and a couple of Choughs pass over high. However, the real bonus comes in the form of two other eagle species: Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial. The Bonelli's are more distant but give good 'scope views of an adult in the company of an immature, and the Spanish Imperial Eagles are a real treat with first a couple of immature birds on the wing and then later a great fly-by from two adults which soar about the rocks, over our heads and drift up with

the Griffons – and then get mobbed by Black Kites! All this is topped off with eye-to-eye views of singing Subalpine Warbler, a confiding pair of Rock Buntings, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, and neat views of Black Stork on the nest.

We meander down to the river a little further upstream to take some coffee amidst the trees in the company of Long-tailed Tits and Sparrowhawk, before we wander onto the river bridge where a huge, chattering, sociable flock of House Martins are a dazzling sight – not least because there are Alpine Swifts here too which twist and turn right before, and below, us. What with the Crag Martins and Black Kites, plus Speckled Wood butterflies it makes for a great stop, but hang on ... there's another Bonelli's Eagle, this time flying low over our heads, and we watch a pair of Black Vultures at their tree nest site too.

We've a grassy lunch spot in mind, where, over bocadillos, chorizo, cheese and fruit, we're immediately distracted by colourful French Lavender, Spotted Rockrose, Gum Cistus and Purple Spurrey all around us, and then by butterflies such as Clouded Yellow, Adonis Blue and Large Tortoiseshell. Our lazy lunch is punctuated by singing Red-rumped Swallows, Woodchat Shrikes, some Serins and a very close male Cirl Bunting, whilst raptors include Booted, Short-toed and yes, Bonelli's Eagle (the latter shows well, stalled in the air above us hunting on the wind). All three vultures are here, including a Griffon on a low nest, and Tony picks out some Red Deer on the hill slopes.

A visit to the Park administrative centre at Villareal de San Carlos has many distractions, but not the gift shop which is shut! However there are ice-creams to be had from the restaurant kiosk (hooray!) and Lynn's hat makes a miracle reappearance after her visit to the Visitor Centre (so how did it end up in the bin in the restaurant?!). Swallows are gathering mud, Crested Larks are running around on the ground, and Gordon finds a Hawfinch in the trees, whilst vultures sail around overhead. Feeling relaxed we drive north but, where the scrubby hillsides bear evidence of the felled non-native Eucalyptus, we then veer sharply off the road as there's a Thekla Lark singing! It shows pretty well and as a bonus there's a lovely Subalpine Warbler and a Steve finds a Woodchat Shrike on the nearby fence.

Feeling pretty pleased, we head off again and just a short drive north we unwind at Mirador de la Trajadilla. There are plenty of distractions here, especially the five or so Hawfinches that show well as they feed in the low elms, plus there are Chaffinch, Serin and, unusually, about six Siskin also in the trees that Ray finds. Entertaining flocks of Azure-winged Magpies bound around in the bushes on the river bank. Across the river there are low cliffs where Griffon and Egyptian Vultures are nesting, close enough for us to study at leisure and Black Kites show incredibly well. And yes, Bonelli's Eagles show well again!

Passing more Hawfinch flocks we finally reach the north-east edge of the Park and

the river cliffs busy with yet more Griffon Vultures – on the wing and languishing in the afternoon warmth. There are more treats in store however, not least an Eagle Owl nest nearby with chicks! Both large chicks give great views, though there's no adult nearby and we watch them for an hour or so whilst a male Rock Bunting is singing and a Short-toed Eagle is in the sky. It seems time to head for home when Ian, after some careful scrutiny, announces that he's found the female Eagle Owl! It's a great finish to the day, as we can enjoy terrific 'scope views of this huge, beautifully marked bird, sitting in a sunny patch amidst the low hillside trees – she's within sight of her youngsters, but probably keen to avoid their persistent attention!

We head back to the hotel on a high and arrive back in luxuriant early-evening Spanish warmth with time to stroll and freshen up before another one of Belem's special dinners. At about 9.00pm we gather up in the hotel courtyard and listen as the local Scops Owls begin their calling – though sadly they are not tempted in by Juan-Pedro's attempts at imitation (or by the more conventional imitation by Ian, and later by his iPod!) and we fail to see them. We'll try again another night and go to bed to the wailing of the local Stone Curlews.

**Day 4** It's an optional earlier start today and most make the 7.15am departure despite the fact that it's still quite dark. It's only a short journey north to a change of habitat at the 'Cáceres steppes' where beyond Trujillo the 'dehesa' opens up to short-cropped grassy meadows and the sun begins to rise in a fiery sky to a landscape dotted with Great Bustards! They are a spectacular sight as we view from near the vehicles, and we watch these magnificent birds strutting in silhouette on the skyline and see them feeding in flocks on the short-cropped stony turf of this pseudo-steppe. We are distracted by a group of six Black-bellied Sandgrouse that we find on the brow of the field, which show quite well in the increasing light before they fly off – and then Mark finds some more which are a little more distant before they flight about showing, well, black bellies (!) and giving their delightful purring call. Calandra Larks give their buzzy song everywhere, seeming to row in the air above us on long, black-looking wings and we drive a little further, seeing White Storks and Black-winged Stilts, plus a Fan-tailed Warbler on a fence-line, before encountering huge numbers of close Great Bustards. There are maybe 100 of these stately birds – including some displaying males turning their wings up to reveal frothing white feathering – as some fly over us on ponderous wings and others stand basking in the full sunshine, their rusty plumage tones enhanced by the light. It's an unforgettable sight, and the song of the larks, the rolling vistas . . . all contribute to a perfect Extremaduran moment.

We turn back, but pull off the road to scan some more stony pasture and are rewarded by fabulous views of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – really lovely views in the early morning haze-free sunshine – a total of 43 birds! There are more Calandra Larks, a female Montagu's Harrier, two overhead Bee-eaters, the odd Great Bustard and, behind us, a White Stork attacking a Black Kite on the ground!

Finally, to cap off our visit we drop in on an area where Little Bustard regularly show and there, sure enough, are two splendid males peering back at us from the hill slope. It's a shame to scamper quickly past the birds, environs and general ambience of being in this lovely habitat – just as the kites are getting up in the warming air – but we have to get back to Viña Las Torres for another good breakfast!

We have a relaxed spell, freshening up, enjoying our hotel and surroundings, and seeing birds like Serin and Azure-winged Magpie, before assembling again to drive over the same ground, but this time making quicker progress along the quiet, picturesque lanes, oaks, olives and carpets of flowers – with small birds everywhere. Spotless Starlings, Red-rumped Swallows, Spanish Sparrows, White Storks and a Black Vulture on the ground, all enliven the journey. Coffee is taken on our arrival at the scenic banks of the narrow Rio Magascar, flanked by steep slopes of holm oaks and colourful swathes of flowers. There are Spanish Terrapins in the river, whilst Kingfishers are a bird highlight amongst Grey Wagtail, Cirl Buntings, Azure-winged Magpies and Crag Martins. Raptors sail over our head – plus a Black Stork - whilst at our feet butterflies include Western Dappled White, Small Copper, Common Blue, and Cleopatra.

A delayed lunch is scheduled further along the road, but we're delayed at a high vantage point by a compelling rolling vista of flowery pasture that stretches for miles, and also by an even more amazing sight – a flock (and they really are) of more than 15 Montagu's Harriers! They appear to be gathering, accompanied by much chattering calls, and are in a tight pack somewhat close to us. It's a truly unforgettable sight and made even more so by the fact that several of the males are displaying to the females in an incredible, 'sky-dancing', aerial ballet – including a first-year male which is unceremoniously driven off by the adults! Here we see Red Kite, Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle and Southern Grey Shrike all over and amidst a carpet of purple French Lavender. Finally lunch is taken by the Rio Almonte where even more colourful Bugloss flowers and holm oaks are by rushing water, and raptors pass overhead – it's a great spot for a picnic – and there are small birds everywhere. There's a Short-toed Eagle overhead, some Red-rumped Swallows, Lynn finds a Green Sandpiper on the river, and we also discover a singing male Black Wheatear. Yet more Bonelli's Eagles make an appearance, as does a Black Stork

We depart for the quiet, scenic town of Monroy. Here we grab a chance to photograph White Storks on nests (and looking it over I realise that this report tends not to have mentioned the many, many stork nests we pass and the many birds feeding amidst the flowers!). Finally we investigate an area of olive groves, open meadows, scattered trees and pines where White Storks are busy at a cluster of nests, and pasture is awash with daisies and buttercups. Butterflies such as Painted Lady and Small Copper are on the wing, with small birds such as Corn Bunting (another ubiquitous report omission!) and Azure-winged around.

Red and Black Kites, Black and Griffon Vultures, Booted and Short-toed Eagles are all on the wing, but we are alert to another raptor and after some patient waiting amidst the holm oaks, Pat alerts us that she may have found our prize ... a Black-shouldered Kite! John heroically dashes off to retrieve Mark and Lynn who've gone for the tea flasks, and we soon enjoy tremendous views of a pair of birds – even seeing the female settle down onto a distant nest. It's a suitable moment at which to head for home happy.

## Day 5

Due a more relaxed day, we depart the hotel and head northwards, pausing to scan ridges of the Sierra de Villuercas where Griffon Vultures are taking to the wing. It's a breezier day with bright sun and the raptors are already up and about. We check out a number of tracks and viewpoints here and in the process earn ourselves some good views of a singing male Black-eared Wheatear in the cistus scrub. We drop down to an area where offal is regularly thrown out for the vultures and there we discover a couple of Black Vultures on the ground amidst the trees, and also a number of Griffon Vultures and some scavenging White Storks. As ever it seems, we see Azure-winged Magpies in the trees – they're beautiful and characterful birds – plus there are Crested Larks and Sardinian Warblers.

Regaining the road, we wind our way in a southerly direction as the lane becomes ever more scenic, with dry stone walls fringing little fields and meadows, and cork oaks – their bark recently harvested – dotting the more open pastures, and all this nestled under the rocks and mountains that form a jagged spine. We see Hoopoes and Spanish Sparrows, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, before we reach Cabañas del Castillo where views invite raptor scans! We drive a short way up and then wander the narrow path up to a spectacular viewpoint – rolling dehesa with open plains beyond seem to stretch forever – where Blackcap, Sardinian Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper and Blue Rock Thrush enliven our stroll, plus there are Spanish Festoon butterflies. At the rocky summit the vista gets even more impressive, with a secluded wooded and farmed valley framed by rocky escarpments and on the nearby crags there's a Peregrine perched. A Black Stork is on the wing, Black Redstarts flit about and a lovely Subalpine Warbler sings from the top of a tree below us. A distant (ok, very distant) Golden Eagle is seen only by the guides, but Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins are more obliging for all! A Rock Bunting is seen too, before we drift down to an idyllic picnic site under the cork oaks where our meal is taken with yet more raptor scans, including some wonderful Short-toed Eagles.

We retrace our steps and stop at the river where a Grey Wagtail is on the rocks and sun shines down from above on some well-marked Marsh Frogs and Terrapins. We try some additional scanning for eagles where we track down a Spanish Swallowtail butterfly. The back lanes weave us through mile-upon-mile of beautiful unspoilt dehesa filled with small birds, and over-flown by Griffon Vultures and White Storks, but we're delighted (to be off the pot-holed roads!)

when we finally reach the scrubby hill-slopes above Madroñera. Here we take some tea and coffee amidst the warm aroma of the blossom of the white Broom, and enjoy some good views of Dartford Warblers, Thekla Larks, Corn Buntings and Stonechats – though not Spectacled Warblers – with Red and Black Kites, plus Bee-eaters overhead.

Back at Viña Las Torres we have a few hours to freshen up and then drive into beautiful Trujillo centre. It's a delightful old medieval town and our wanderings take us briefly around the buildings in the main square – the Plaza Mayor – before we head up through narrow cobbled streets to the high terraces and battlements, where there are more panoramic views over the countryside. In the air Lesser Kestrels are chattering everywhere, there are Red-rumped Swallows, Pallid Swifts, Black Kites and, best of all, White Storks gliding all around and nesting on many of the buildings. They bill-clatter in display, re-arrange nest material, and those sitting on eggs keep them warm. There are also some Bee-eaters perching on wires too! We meet up at the square for drinks and more Pallid Swifts, before strolling to our restaurant for the night, close to the imposing statue of Pizarro – just one of the famous/infamous conquistador sons of Trujillo who, in his case, conquered Peru for Spain – and enjoy a marvelous dinner before wandering out into the night-time cobbled streets and then driving home. It's all delightful!

**Day 6** We set off south for the day, a little earlier than usual as we're keen to beat the heat of the day. The forecast of 27°C is likely to produce much heat haze on the southern plains – where we are headed. In fact a speedy journey has us, 30 minutes later, amidst the stony agricultural fields at Vegas Altas where, almost immediately, we locate our main target: Black-bellied Sandgrouse! Good views are soon had by all and in fact over the next 1½ hours we obtain ever-better views of about 70 of these beautifully-marked, pseudo-steppe inhabitants, both in flight (when their black bellies are especially prominent, and their distinctive purring calls can best be heard) and on the ground (when their delicate grey-and-rusty markings can best be appreciated).

However, sandgrouse are not all that are here. Jan picks out the Little Bustards that are in small flocks in the rough, abandoned ploughed fields, Great Bustards strut amidst the cereal crops, Marsh Harriers quarter the crops, Crested and Calandra Larks are in song everywhere, and we obtain some good views of drably-marked, tiny Red Avadavats. A Quail is calling and, with a little coaxing from the iPod, it creeps out into the open on the edge of a ditch right next to one of the minibuses. From the highest point in this flat land we're delighted to discover five Collared Pratincoles hawking in the air – just arrived back from Africa – and even more delighted when they settle on the ground close to us, plus a Gull-billed Tern hawks along the track, giving us a close fly-by view! Some calling Stone Curlew (unseen), and some Cattle Egrets plus a Common Buzzard complete an excellent session.

After some coffee, we move on to the Rio Gargaligas for a change of habitat. A nearby White Stork on a nest eyes us as we scan from a quiet river bridge and take in a host of new birds on the reed-choked channel. Cetti's Warblers sing loudly and occasionally show well, there are Snipe, Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpipers lurking along the muddy margins, a distant Great Reed Warbler is in song, plus there are Moorhen and Coot on the water. A Spotted Crake is a really nice surprise, a Water Rail shows briefly and a Southern Grey Shrike is on the wires too.

The rolling stony steppe beckons, but with temperatures rising (and all of the key birds seen well already) we opt for a more soothing, sheltered spot for some lunch down by the Rio Zujar. Soft grass, shady poplars and nearby water are a great backdrop for some picnic munching, but of course here too there are compelling birds. A Nightingale in song shows well, there's a rare Robin, some invisible Penduline Tits calling (shame), and a Booted Eagle or two in the sky. Lunch over, we make our way back through the hot grasslands and seek out the cooler breezes by the damn at the Orellana reservoir, where Yellow-legged, Lesser Black-back and Black-headed Gulls are on the water. Some careful scanning reveals a Great Crested Grebe or two, but we press on back north, all the time scanning the overhead wires for a hint of a perched Bee-eater – by now on the top of most people's 'Most Wanted' list!

North of Madrigalejo, we drop in on another canal – more Avadavats, Cetti's, a few Marsh Harriers, Black Kites, Woodchat Shrikes and Stonechat – where the real prizes are a flying Purple Heron (picked out by Sue), and, best of all, a few Bee-eaters perched on the low fence which hawk by close to us! We're all delighted, who can ever tire of these charismatic bird jewels?! We drive slowly in the afternoon sun to the Embalse de Sierra Brava where the wide-open stretch of water is surrounded by short turf which is a blaze of purple thyme in flower. Crested Larks and Corn Buntings sing nearby and there are Lesser Kestrels in the air, but it is the water birds which keep the telescopes busy and we're soon on to distant Gull-billed Terns, Great Crested Grebe, Common Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover, whilst Denise picks out some closer Collared Pratincoles.

Our final stop is an almost last-chance for Stone Curlew and as we begin scanning we locate some nice groups of Short-toed Larks in the grazed pasture near Zorita. Our scanning continues, and it comes up trumps! Skulking furtively amongst the stones and leathery squill leaves, there are two of these intriguing birds whose staring yellow eyes glare out at all they survey as they stalk around the margins of the open pasture, close to the road. It's a bit of a highlight for many in the group and a neat way to end the day.

After yet another truly marvellous dinner, we have another Scops Owl no-show – frustrating because we've enjoyed such confiding birds here in the past – but the night sky is equally wonderful. It's clear, with no light pollution and there are

terrific views of Saturn and its rings.

**Day 7** It's our last full day and we've much to do and see. First up, a small group of us try again for a Scops Owl at first light – but the little blighter sits tight in a tree incredibly close to us, after having flown over and given tantalizing flight views! It's obviously a more wary bird on territory this year! However we do get more sky-at-night entertainment with great views of Jupiter and its moons.

After breakfast we head north, calling in at some areas of low scrub to try for Spectacled Warbler, where Thekla Larks, Dartford Warbler and Woodchat Shrikes show well, and then move on to a gorge with a river damn high above it, where raptors such as Egyptian, Griffon and Black Vulture show well, and a superb group of Bee-eaters are investigating a low sandy bank! The air is busy too with Crag, House and Sand Martins.

Then it's on to the bonus wetland riches of Embalse de Arrocampo, where arriving there doesn't look to be much to see – but first impressions can be deceptive. There are two lagoons with a fringe of reeds and rushes close to a prominent power station with initially few birds on view however we easily spend an hour and a half here seeing some great birds. Purple Herons flap about and comical Purple Gallinules use their enormous feet to feed on reed rhizomes. We get good views of Savi's Warblers, and John finds us a Little Bittern perched on the edge of the water. There's Marsh Harrier, Bee-eater, Cormorant, Great Crested Grebe, Osprey, Cetti's Warbler, White Storks, Reed and Sedge Warblers, plus a really confiding Squacco Heron drops in too ... easily enough to keep us busy through to coffee break and ready for our lunch!

Travelling north and west, we drive through mile upon mile of dehesa on the new autovia, where Hoopoes flap across the world, and two Black-shouldered Kites are sitting in a roadside tree, but we soon turn off and onto quieter lanes. Amidst meadows, poplars and holm oaks we enjoy White Storks, Southern Grey Shrikes and a fabulous Short-toed Eagle before heading south and into Monfragüe Natural Park once again.

This northerly route is a delight, passing through a charming landscape of meadows and cork oaks, and we make a special effort to take in some indigenous rural sights such as stripped cork oak trees, and especially some of the local black pigs, the cerdo negro, who are the source of the nationally-renowned ham jamon iberico. In fact we see this local livestock amidst tranquil, man-made, but very unspoilt, landscapes with birds such as Bee-eaters, Woodchat Shrike, Spanish Sparrow, Thekla Lark and White Stork for company. We have to pinch ourselves to believe that the forecast in Britain tomorrow is for snow!

Lunch is next, and taken in the sunshine and shade of the cork oaks near to the Portilla del Tietar. It is delightfully relaxing amidst the gliding Griffon Vultures, or at

least it is until Mark picks out a Spanish Imperial Eagle in the sky! We get good views of the distinctive pale leading edge of the wings, whilst listening to the song of Cirl Bunting, Short-toed Treecreeper and Blackcap.

We stop to the south to view a low Black Stork nest and then at various raptor viewpoints, but in fact next the Park centre is a must (for ice-creams again!). We then drive south to Peña Falcon where the vultures area is again compelling, there are flying and perched Black Storks, and some perched Red-rumped Swallows give great photo views. The Castillo at Peña Falcon is a spectacular site, reached by a winding road and then steep stone steps – it's hard to keep up with David! - after which we emerge to a rocky promontory opposite the peak of Peña Falcon. This would be breathtaking enough, but in fact it commands views up and down the river, over the expanse of the Natural Park, and over mile-upon-mile of dehesa stretching south, and to top it all, Griffon Vultures are sailing by at eye-level and below giving superlative views. We revel in all of this, attempt to take some photos, see Egyptian Vultures and know that finally we must head for home.

Our last dinner is a lovely occasion, with pre-dinner drinks to send us on our way. We run through our customary, fun round-up of the week, placing votes for our 'favourites' of the week and thank our hosts Juan-Pedro, Belem, and assistant Angeles for a tremendous welcome.

**Day 8** It's our last day and a shame to have to leave, but we depart at 6.30am for our journey to Madrid, seeing a male Montagu's Harrier as we go and pausing at a roadside coffee stop, before arriving at the airport for our journeys home and farewells. It's been a delightful and triumphant week – we hope that Mark can show the arriving second Speyside group an equally good array of birds.

**BIRDS**

Little Grebe  
 Great Crested Grebe  
 Cormorant  
 Little Bittern  
 Squacco Heron  
 Cattle Egret  
 Little Egret  
 Grey Heron  
 Purple Heron  
 Black Stork  
 White Stork  
 Gadwall  
 Mallard  
 Teal  
 Shoveler  
 Red-crested Pochard  
 Black-shouldered Kite  
 Black Kite  
 Red Kite  
 Egyptian Vulture  
 Griffon Vulture  
 Black Vulture  
 Short-toed Eagle  
 Marsh Harrier  
 Montagu's Harrier  
 Sparrowhawk  
 Common Buzzard  
 Spanish Imperial Eagle  
 Golden Eagle (*leaders*)  
 Booted Eagle  
 Bonelli's Eagle  
 Osprey  
 Lesser Kestrel  
 Common Kestrel  
 Peregrine  
 Red-legged Partridge  
 Quail  
 Water Rail  
 Spotted Crake  
 Moorhen  
 Purple Gallinule  
 Coot  
 Little Bustard  
 Great Bustard  
 Black-winged Stilt  
 Stone Curlew  
 Collared Pratincole  
 Little Ringed Plover  
 Snipe  
 Curlew (*heard*)  
 Greenshank  
 Green Sandpiper  
 Common Sandpiper  
 Black-headed Gull  
 Lesser Black-backed Gull  
 Yellow-legged Gull

Gull-billed Tern  
 Black-bellied Sandgrouse  
 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse  
 Feral Rock Dove  
 Woodpigeon  
 Collared Dove  
 Great Spotted Cuckoo  
 Cuckoo  
 Barn Owl (*heard*)  
 Scops Owl  
 Eagle Owl  
 Little Owl  
 Common Swift  
 Pallid Swift  
 Alpine Swift  
 Common Kingfisher  
 European Bee-eater  
 Roller  
 Hoopoe  
 Great Spotted Woodpecker  
 (*heard*)  
 Calandra Lark  
 Short-toed Lark  
 Crested Lark  
 Thekla Lark  
 Woodlark  
 Sand Martin  
 Crag Martin  
 Swallow  
 Red-rumped Swallow  
 House Martin  
 Tawny Pipit (*heard*)  
 Meadow Pipit  
 Spanish Yellow Wagtail  
 Grey Wagtail  
 White Wagtail  
 Wren  
 Robin  
 Nightingale  
 Black Redstart  
 Stonechat  
 Northern Wheatear  
 Black-eared Wheatear  
 Black Wheatear  
 Blue Rock Thrush  
 Blackbird  
 Song Thrush  
 Mistle Thrush  
 Cetti's Warbler  
 Fan-tailed Warbler  
 Savi's Warbler  
 Sedge Warbler  
 Reed Warbler  
 Great Reed Warbler  
 Dartford Warbler  
 Subalpine Warbler  
 Sardinian Warbler

Blackcap  
 Chiffchaff  
 Western Bonelli's Warbler  
 Goldcrest  
 Bearded Tit  
 Long-tailed Tit  
 Blue Tit  
 Great Tit  
 Nuthatch  
 Short-toed Treecreeper  
 Southern Grey Shrike  
 Woodchat Shrike  
 Jay  
 Azure-winged Magpie  
 Magpie  
 Chough  
 Jackdaw  
 Carrion Crow  
 Raven  
 Spotless Starling  
 House Sparrow  
 Spanish Sparrow  
 Rock Sparrow  
 Chaffinch  
 Serin  
 Red Avadavat  
 Greenfinch  
 Goldfinch  
 Siskin  
 Linnet  
 Hawfinch  
 Cirl Bunting  
 Rock Bunting  
 Corn Bunting

**TOTAL SPECIES: 146****MAMMALS**

Rabbit  
 Brown Hare  
 Red Deer  
 Ro Deer  
 Red Fox

**REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS**

Iberian Marsh Frog  
 Stripe-necked Terrapin  
 Fire-bellied Toad

**BUTTERFLIES**

Rosy Grizzled Skipper  
 Orange Tip  
 Small White  
 Large White  
 Green-striped White  
 Western Dappled White  
 Clouded Yellow

Cleopatra  
 Spanish Festoon  
 Swallowtail  
 Spanish Swallowtail  
 Large Tortoiseshell  
 Painted Lady  
 Red Admiral  
 Small Heath  
 Speckled Wood  
 Small Copper  
 Holly Blue  
 Adonis Blue

**OTHER  
INVERTEBRATES**

Centipede sp  
 Oil Beetle  
 Rhinoceros Beetle  
 Peacock moth