

Holiday Highlights  
Extremadura Winter 'recce'  
11 – 16 November 2010

**Guide:** Mark Denman

**Guests:** Pam & Robert May, Jane Simpson, Sue & Alan Ripley and Tony Edwardes

**Day 1:** We all meet up at a very wet and windy Gatwick and, after a slight delay, and a rather interesting (!) take off we're soon heading south for our short break in Extremadura. The contrast in weather could not really be greater as we land in a sunny, calm Madrid and after a quick bite to eat we load up the van and start our journey, soon notching up our first birds.

Common Kestrels and Red Kites patrol the roadside fields and we encounter a large group of White Storks and Cattle Egrets. We make a brief comfort stop and birds here include Skylark, Crested Lark, Stonechat and best of all two smart Black Redstarts. As we near Trujillo we see our first Griffon Vultures, spiralling on late afternoon thermals, and approaching Vina Las Torres, our idyllic base for the week, Alan points out two Hoopoes sitting on some wires. We are met by our wonderful host Juan Pedro, who gives us a quick tour of the hotel and then shows us to our rooms. After a delicious meal prepared by Belen we enjoy coffee and Acorn liquor in front of a roaring open fire, and before heading to bed for some well earned rest we go over our exciting plans for the next few days.

**Day 2:** We awaken to a beautiful sunny day and after breakfast we're soon away, after pausing briefly to admire some Azure-winged Magpies and an obliging Hoopoe. First port of call is a ridge that looks very promising for raptors, and we soon find a little group of Griffon Vultures sitting on the skyline. A couple of Iberian Grey Shrikes show very well on wires behind us, and the air is full of the sweet song of Thekla Lark and Woodlark. Rather less obliging are the Dartford and Sardinian Warblers that scold teasingly from the dense scrub, but the Griffons soon take to the air and when soon after a Black Vulture cruises over we are able to compare their contrasting flight profiles- how educational!

We find both a Peregrine and Blue Rock Thrush on a ridge, but they are a little distant so we decide to make our way to a scenic spot by a river for coffee. Birds here include a pair of very vocal Ravens, Grey Wagtails, Cirl Bunting another Blue Rock Thrush, and Sue finds a very smart Firecrest. Over lunch we add Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit and Crag Martin to our list whilst enjoying what must be one of the most spectacular views in Extremadura. Walking back to the van we see Short-toed Treecreeper,

Blackcaps and some very striking male Black Redstarts, while Jane makes friends with various dogs and donkeys!

After a final brief stop in the Cabanos area, where we hear both Crested Tit and Nuthatch we head back towards Trujillo across the Belen plains, where we hope to encounter our first steppe birds of the holiday. Passing several big spirals of Griffon Vultures we stop by a small pool where some Lapwing are standing. We pick out Snipe and Green Sandpiper as well, and proceed to chase big flocks of Sparrows along the pot-holed road, eventually managing to pick out Rock and Spanish from the more modest House variety. There are Common Kestrels and Red Kites hunting the mixture of steppe and farmland, but the Great Bustards we were hoping to see fail to materialise, though we do manage to find lots of Little Bustards including a splendid flock of over eighty birds whose black and white wings look dazzling in the late afternoon sunshine.

The air is thick with the ecstatic song of Calandra Lark and Tony brilliantly manages to pick one out sitting on a rock, all of us getting great views through the telescope. A couple of Little Owls and a very brief Stone Curlew round off what has been splendid day so we head back to Vina las Torres for wine tasting and another of Belen's tasty meals.

**Day 3:** Today is Crane Day! We're heading south to some rice fields that are a famous area for wintering Common Cranes, and after many years of staying at Vina las Torres we're delighted that Juan Pedro is finally joining us to look at some birds. We've only been travelling a few miles when we encounter thick fog, so instead of looking for some steppe birds as a starter to the day we head straight for the main course! Through the slowly clearing mist we soon spot a few Cranes in a rocky field to the right of the van so we stop eager to get a view of these majestic visitors. More cranes fly over and land to our left, joining several dozen that are already there, and as we carry on to even more suitable habitat, flushing many Green Sandpipers as we go, we realise we are surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of Cranes, truly spectacular looking birds.

Climbing out of the van we are thrilled as wave after wave pass overhead, their evocative calls filling heavy damp air, while little parties of Red Avadavats dance before us, some still sporting their strawberry like breeding plumage - lovely! Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards are the dominant raptors here and huge flocks of finches and sparrows explode from every field we drive past. There is a central pool that used to irrigate the surrounding rice fields and it can be good for wildfowl and waders at this time of year, but aside from hundreds of Mallards all we see are Greylag Geese, Gadwall and Common Sandpipers.

However, from this high vantage point we now realise that there are not hundreds but thousands of Cranes, and along with good views of Chiffchaff and Zitting Cisticola there is great excitement when both Penduline Tit and Bluethroat appear almost simultaneously, the Tit rather more obliging than the skulking first winter Bluethroat.

Moving on, Tony spots a stunning male Hen Harrier that drifts past, and we try to creep up on a nice perched Red Kite, only for it to be chased off by a rather aggressive Hoopoe! Passing a well known spot for Black-shouldered Kite we glimpse one of these most sought after of raptors perched on top of one of the trees. Unfortunately it disappears before we can get it in the telescopes, but we enjoy the continuing spectacle as squadron after squadron of Cranes pass overhead and huge flocks cram the fields around us. Sue spots a Kingfisher as it flashes along a drainage ditch and with thoughts turning to coffee in a local bar we spot two Black-shouldered Kites in the top of a dead tree. This time we're in luck and they pose brilliantly, we even manage some photos through the telescope - great stuff! We add Great Egret to our list and get brilliant views of a Dartford Warbler before enjoying a cup of coffee and a cake to round off a fabulous morning's birding.

Back at the reservoir we bid farewell to Juan Pedro and have a quick scan before going for lunch. Amongst the huge numbers of Mallard there are many Coot, Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon and Great Crested Grebes and we find a few Pochard, Teal and a single female Red-crested Pochard. We have our lunch at a really idyllic spot, but there are rather more fisherman than birds! That said, it really is very relaxing sitting amongst the Holm Oaks looking down on the reservoir and after a tasty picnic we decide on a complete change of scene and go to look for some birds of the steppe.

Initially it seems rather quiet, although we do hear some distant Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, and things start to hot up when a ring tail Hen Harrier flushes two Great Bustards, but they settle behind a ridge before everyone sees them - how frustrating. We've not been long back in the van when four Black-bellied Sandgrouse fly over, and on clambering out we hear their lovely bubbling calls. Although we see where they land they are extremely difficult to pick out in the long grass, but eventually we're all fairly convinced we can make them out! The habitat on the remainder of the road looks perfect for Bustards, but try as we might we just can't find any, so we decide the best course of action is to return to where we saw the two Great Bustards earlier and hope they walk into view. This proves to be a good decision as Tony finds some much closer Black-bellied Sandgrouse that show very well, and we've hardly had time to enjoy them when two female Great Bustards give us a spectacular flypast, and over the next half an hour or so we divide our

time between Sandgrouse, Bustards, Little Owls and Hen Harriers, bringing to a close another fantastic day of birding in Extremadura.

**Day 4:** Unfortunately, a big weather front is moving across Spain today and we wake to dark skies and heavy rain. With the promise of a slight improvement this afternoon we decide to use the first part of the morning to go back to Cabanos where Pam lost her jade Dolphin necklace, a sentimental memento from New Zealand. Driving the same route as on our first morning, the ridges that we scanned for vultures are cloaked in low cloud and the rain is persistent. When we arrive at the area that the necklace was lost we don our waterproofs and start searching the wispy grassland. Despite a valiant effort by all however we don't manage to find it and sadly have to admit defeat.

Our targets today are birds of the steppe, so we head back to an area to the west of Trujillo that has always been very productive. With the rain easing a little we see several Red Kites take to the air, but by the time we reach our coffee spot the drizzle has returned. After hot drinks and some of Belen's delicious cake we move up the road to scan some arable fields, immediately finding lots of Little Bustards amongst the ubiquitous Lapwings. A few Golden Plover are scurrying around the horizon and we soon find our main prize, a group of beautiful Pin-tailed Sandgrouse that are surprisingly difficult to see in the muddy field. With an umbrella over the telescope we all manage good views of these elusive birds before moving a little further along the road and finding a nice group of Great Bustards. From a rough track we admire these enormous denizens of the steppe and even manage to get some digi-scoped mementos of these fantastic birds - thank goodness for that umbrella!

We do try to go a little further into the heart of this unique habitat, but the condition of the track is very poor so we decide to head back towards Trujillo, though not before seeing some Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight and a nice Hen Harrier. With the rain now very heavy we have to abandon our plans for the afternoon, instead heading back to the comfort of Vina las Torres, where we eat lunch, watch the Grand Prix(!) and some of us manage a stroll round the lanes later on when the promised sun finally arrives.

**Day 5:** We're spending our final full day in Monfrague National Park, and thankfully we're blessed with beautiful blue skies. En route to the south entrance to the park we pass several Buzzards and Red Kites sitting on telegraph poles and little parties of Azure-winged Magpies squabbling amongst the Holm Oaks. As we approach Pena Falcon rock there seem to be no birds in the sky, but on climbing out of the van, dozens of Griffons launch themselves onto the early thermals, as if they have been waiting for us! They look

fantastic against the bright blue sky, and as more and more birds take to the air we manage to pick out a few larger Black Vultures.

Some very vocal Ravens that are active at the top of the rock face are dwarfed by the magnificent Vultures, and a brief Peregrine is too quick for all of us to get on. Whilst here, Jane finds some fresh Otter spraint on the road and Alan finds us a handsome male Blue Rock Thrush that looks gorgeous in the morning sunshine. Crag Martins, the only non-migratory hirundine, flash before us while a couple of Black Redstarts deliver their scratchy song from on high. The sounds of Robin and Blackcap that we've heard all over Extremadura are here also and several flocks of Lapwing pass high overhead.

After tea and coffee, where we can compare Thekla and Crested lark and photograph Small Copper and Clouded Yellow butterflies we move to an idyllic spot by the river Tietar for lunch. Just as we're tucking into our rolls a very brief Spanish Imperial Eagle appears then dives behind a ridge in an instant, but Sue points out our first Sparrowhawk of the week and the photographers amongst us enjoy a very showy Griffon Vulture. From a viewpoint along the road we get more fantastic views of vultures and although we all hear a Kingfisher, only Rob is lucky enough to see it.

With time marching on and the Eagle failing to re-appear we move on, passing a rather scruffy Fox, and some rather more attractive Red Deer, including a handsome Stag. After a brief stop in Villareal, where the only birds seem to be Linnets, we decide to end the day where we started, at Pena Falcon. It's much warmer than this morning and there are many more vultures on the wing, with dozens right above our heads now. A Peregrine appears amongst the throng, but sadly no eagles show, so with more wine to be tasted and more delicious food to be eaten we head back up the road to Trujillo, and on to Vina las Torres for the last time.

**Day 6:** After singing Happy Birthday to Marina (JP and Belen's daughter), and thanking and saying goodbye to our wonderful hosts we head towards Madrid to catch our flight home. We've got a bit of time to spare so we stop off at some wetlands near a power station to see if we can add to our impressive list of birds. The explosive song of Cetti's Warbler is all around and the reeds seem to be alive with wintering Chiffchaffs. Both male and female Marsh Harriers cruise past and with a bit of perseverance, most of us manage to see one or two Purple Swamp Hens that are skulking in the reed-bed. Penduline Tits call distantly and Sue points out a White Stork that is circling high above some pylons, but pride of place goes to our final bird of the trip as a Great Bittern glides towards us then sinks into reeds never to be seen again.

**BIRDS**

Little Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
Cormorant  
Great Bittern  
Cattle Egret  
Little Egret  
Great Egret  
Grey Heron  
White Stork  
Greylag Goose  
Common Crane  
Gadwall  
Mallard  
Shoveler  
Teal  
Pintail  
Wigeon  
Pochard  
Red-crested Pochard  
Black-shouldered Kite  
Red Kite  
Griffon Vulture  
Black Vulture  
Marsh Harrier  
Hen Harrier  
Sparrowhawk  
Common Buzzard  
Spanish Imperial Eagle  
Common Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Red-legged Partridge  
Moorhen  
Purple Swamp Hen  
Coot  
Little Bustard  
Great Bustard  
Stone Curlew  
Lapwing  
Snipe  
Green Sandpiper  
Common Sandpiper  
Black-headed Gull  
Yellow-legged Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Black-bellied Sandgrouse  
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Barn Owl  
Kingfisher

Hoopoe  
Great-spotted Woodpecker  
Calandra Lark  
Crested Lark  
Thekla Lark  
Woodlark  
Skylark  
Crag Martin  
Meadow Pipit  
Grey Wagtail  
White Wagtail  
Wren  
Robin  
Black Redstart  
Bluethroat  
Stonechat  
Blue Rock Thrush  
Blackbird  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Cett's Warbler  
Zitting Cisticola  
Dartford Warbler  
Sardinian Warbler  
Blackcap  
Chiffchaff  
Iberian Chiffchaff  
Firecrest  
Long-tailed Tit  
Crested Tit  
Blue Tit  
Great Tit  
Penduline Tit  
Nuthatch  
Short-toed Treecreeper  
Iberian Grey Shrike  
Jay  
Azure-winged Magpie  
Magpie  
Jackdaw  
Raven  
Common Starling  
Spotless Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Spanish Sparrow  
Rock Sparrow  
Red Avadavat  
Chaffinch  
Serin  
Greenfinch

Goldfinch  
Linnet  
Cirl Bunting  
Rock Bunting  
Corn Bunting

**MAMMALS**

Rabbit  
Red Deer  
Red Fox  
Badger (dead)

**BUTTERFLIES**

Small White  
Western dappled White  
Clouded Yellow  
Painted Lady  
Red Admiral