

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura Winter
3 – 8 November 2011

Leader: Mark Denman

Guests: Grainne Farrington, Annie & David Erdman, Helena Jefferson, Sue Warner, Elma MacDonald and Sheila Colquhoun

Day 1: We all meet up at Gatwick Airport and after clearing security and enjoying a little breakfast we're soon winging our way south towards sunny Madrid. We're on our way in no time and after leaving the built up areas around the city we start seeing our first birds. Wintering Red Kites are common and we also see several Common Kestrels and a few Common Buzzards.

At a service station we find a couple of Black Redstarts and a very handsome Iberian Grey Shrike, while Elma is thrilled to find a couple of distant Hoopoes, her first encounter with these spectacular birds. A pair of Fan-tailed Warblers pose most obligingly and a Griffon Vulture drifts past while sweet singing Crested Larks serenade us - a great start!

Before long we arrive at our base for the week, the charming Vina Las Torres and we're greeted by our delightful hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. JP takes us on a quick tour of the property before we freshen up for dinner. After a welcome drink and the first of Belen's wonderful meals we have a quick chat about our exciting plans for the next few days before heading to bed for some welcome rest.

Day 2: With rain forecast for today we're pleased to find the morning dry, and after breakfast we meet by the van in front of the hotel. A party of noisy Azure-winged Magpies drop down in front of us near a few puddles and we manage to get good views through the scope of these special birds. An Iberian Grey Shrike shows well, but the scolding Sardinian Warbler that calls noisily from behind a wall is far more challenging. A dashing female Merlin that chases a couple of Song Thrushes is too quick for most, so with the Van loaded its all aboard for the start proper of our adventure together.

Our first stop is a nice area of steppe grassland where we're hoping to find some of the most special birds in this part of Spain. Sheila spots a Northern Wheatear which is a bit of a surprise at this late date, its white rump giving

it away as it flies from perch to perch. A little further along the road we find our first Great Bustards, three young males that look superb as they strut through the long grass, while on an area of short turf nearby Grainne brilliantly picks out a group of ten Black-bellied Sandgrouse that we all manage to get nice prolonged views of through the scopes as they creep through the boulders. These Sandgrouse, that can often be so elusive look absolutely beautiful, and its a joy to be able to fully appreciate their cryptic plumage with no heat haze!

In the next field we see a group of Little Bustards, so we climb back in the van and move a little closer. Although not that far away the vegetation is a little thicker so viewing is not quite so easy, but we all manage good views eventually, amidst the ecstatic song of the Calandra Larks that surround us.

After seeing our first distant Marsh Harriers we decide to move across the road to a big reservoir to look for some wildfowl. A few Great Crested Grebes are fairly close, but most of the ducks seem to be on the far side - typical! Amongst a little group of Coot we find two pairs of Gadwall and a few distant Wigeon but there is great excitement when a Kingfisher flashes in front of us and appears to land on the side of the dam. A quick search fails to locate the Kingfisher but we do find a nice big female Peregrine Falcon that we joke does look as if it's just eaten the Kingfisher - maybe!!? We also see and hear our first Cranes here and manage better views of a smart male Sardinian Warbler. The Peregrine then takes to the air and is joined by the much smaller male and we are able to compare them for the next ten minutes as we are treated to a superb display, a Red Kite and Marsh Harrier adding to the spectacle - brilliant!

Driving a little further Annie spots another brief Kingfisher and we manage to creep up on more Cranes at the side of the road that look majestic as they take to the wing, their haunting calls filling the air. Huge flocks of Spanish Sparrow crowd the roadside bushes and another group of Great Bustards show well and with Cranes in every field as far as the eye can see this area clearly warrants more exploration, so we vow to return after a quick coffee and comfort stop in a nearby bar.

Suitably refreshed we head back towards the rice fields, but not before David has pointed out a couple of White Wagtails and a smart Grey Wagtail. As we approach the rice fields we get great views of a couple of Red Avadavats and some uncharacteristically obliging Fan-tailed Warblers! Huge numbers of Common Crane surround us along with many White Storks and on climbing

out of the van it is a magical experience to watch as huge squadrons of Cranes move from one field to another. There are lots of small birds too, with the local Spanish Sparrows joined by wintering Meadow Pipits and Skylarks and busy little parties of the introduced Avadavats and Waxbills. Marsh Harriers patrol the area and Sue is very pleased when Sheila manages to expertly pick out a couple of distant Snipe.

We have our lunch on a bridge overlooking a river that is covered in reeds. The explosive song of Cetti's Warbler surrounds us but typically the singers remain hidden, much more obliging are the smart Waxbills and the many Chiffchaffs that seem to enjoy this habitat at this time of year. A couple of Penduline Tits are calling nearby and eventually we manage to locate one that actually sits up in a tree and preens! Helena has a close encounter with two Kingfishers and as light rain begins to fall we head back to the rice fields to enjoy the Cranes once more. There seem to be even more now with big flocks arriving all the time, and we come across a tractor that is being followed by hundreds of Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets and White Storks. A distant male Hen Harrier is a new bird for Elma so we dash along the dirt track to try and get better views, eventually catching it as it quarters a field right next to us, the 'silver ghost' looking very elegant compared to the more powerful Marsh Harriers that are common here.

Once again we climb out of the van to enjoy this magnificent spectacle with Cranes as far as the eye can see. We find more Great Bustards in a distant field but it's the Cranes that demand our attention, and we all agree that impressive as they are to look at, it's the evocative sounds they make that make it such a memorable experience. Driving back towards the main road a Bluethroat shoots up from the side of the track into what seems like a small amount of cover, but despite much searching it somehow manages to elude us, so with wine tasting and dinner beckoning we head back to Vina las Torres after what has been a superb first day.

Day 3: By the time we've had breakfast and got ready for our days excursion the fog that greeted us at first light has cleared to reveal a lovely sunny day. Driving down the track to the road we can't resist stopping to admire a very smart Hoopoe that is sitting on a nearby wall, and we're thrilled when it's joined by three more!

First port of call is some steppe grassland near Trujillo where we're hoping to encounter Bustards and Sandgrouse. Big flocks of Linnet and Spanish

Sparrows are on the move and the first bird we admire through the scope is a nice close Iberian Shrike. A group of Great Bustards are just visible in the next field so we clamber back into the van and move up the road in order to get a better look. By the time we're out of the van the Bustards seem to have moved on, but we do find a nice group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on the brow of the hill, unfortunately however, just as we are about to scope them they take to the air and we realise that there are at least a hundred birds in the flock, which although very impressive is rather frustrating! We follow them in flight for a few minutes and decide to take one of the dirt tracks in order to try and re-locate them, though not before admiring a group of Griffon Vultures that Grainne has found sitting in a tree.

There are lots of small birds in the area, wintering Skylarks and Meadow Pipits joining the resident Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings. A nice group of Griffon Vultures show well, looking a lot less elegant on the ground than they do in flight and then we see the reason for the Sandgrouse departure when four hunters come striding into view! A ring-tail Hen Harrier drifts past and we see several groups of Great Bustards but sadly the Sandgrouse elude us so we head off to a secluded river valley for a coffee.

Just as we are approaching our destination a magnificent Golden Eagle appears from the valley below us giving fantastic views, and we jump out of the van for a better view. Over the next half an hour or so we get superb views of two adult Goldies and a young bird still showing lots of white in the wings and tail, and we're able to compare the very different flight profiles with the many Griffon Vultures that are on the wing. A sweet singing Woodlark fails to reveal itself so we head off again towards our lunch spot by another river. Driving through the mixture of steppe and farmland we see huge numbers of Starlings, Pipits and Larks along with lots of Lapwing and a Peregrine perched on a pylon.

After a quick stop for fuel we park by the river and enjoy the lunch Belen has prepared for us, Elma and Sheila spotting a Kingfisher that flashes past and under the bridge. Suitably refreshed we go for a walk along the river through a lovely bit of Dehesa, all of us enjoying the warm sunshine. As we approach a little lake the first birds we see are Great Egret, Little Egret and Grey Heron together which make for a nice comparison. A perched Merlin at the side of the water is a nice surprise, and after about half an hour of sitting almost motionless we're treated to it hunting along the river bank. There are lots of Little Grebes and Teal on the lake, and waders here include several Green Sandpipers, Greenshank and three winter plumaged Spotted Redshank that Annie finds for

us. The warm sunshine is encouraging a few Dragonflies including Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly, Red-veined Darter and Broad-bodied Chaser and other new birds here include a little group of Cormorants, a brief Pintail and a Serin. On the walk back to the van Sue finds a big Stripe-necked Terrapin and some of us flush a Brown Hare that scurries away and rather impressively leaps across the river! It's been another great day, so with more wine to be tasted and another of Belen's meals to enjoy we head back to the hotel, excited by the prospect of a day in Monfrague National Park tomorrow.

Day 4: It's a glorious day without a cloud in the sky as we set off for our day in Monfrague. We take a slight detour to an area that is very good for warblers as we're very keen to see Dartford Warbler. A Woodlark sings from a hidden perch, and despite much searching we can't find this one either, much more obliging however are the Thekla Larks that remain on the tops of bushes long enough for scope views, allowing all the subtle differences from Crested Lark to be seen. There are lots of Dartford Warblers in the area and we see several birds flitting from bush to bush, although they are terribly quick and takes quite a while for everyone to even get a glimpse of these characterful little birds. A couple of Jays fly past and a much closer Woodlark starts singing, but our minds are on rather bigger birds today, so we walk back to the van and head off for Monfrague.

As we approach Pena Falcon rock we can see lots of Griffon Vultures on the wing and we soon see our first Black Vultures of the holiday. It doesn't take long for everyone to master the differences between these two fantastic birds, and Elma picks out a Peregrine high amongst the Griffons that looks absolutely tiny! A handsome Red Deer stag is on the far slope, but we soon are diverted when Grainne and Sue find a superb male Blue Rock Thrush that shows brilliantly in the morning sunshine. Perched Griffon's fill the frame through the telescopes, and we all enjoy close up views of what has to be one of the more attractive Vultures.

A quick comfort stop in Villareal adds Clouded Yellow Butterfly to our list and David finds us a nice little group of Crested Larks that compare well with the earlier Thekla's. Our next stop is an area that has been good for Bonelli's Eagle in the past, and walking down to the picnic tables we see several Song Thrushes and a very brief Hawfinch that sadly doesn't linger. It's very warm now and despite the late date we see quite a few butterflies. There are lots of Clouded Yellows along with Lang's Short-tailed Blue and a pretty little Brown Argus. A family party of Black Redstarts are very entertaining and David and Annie spot

a Fox swimming down the river. A Bonelli's Eagle finally appears perched high on a pylon, and we get great views when it takes to the wing and is joined by its mate, giving us a prolonged opportunity to study this most distinctive of Eagles. We like it so much here that we decide to stay and have lunch and Helena finds us a nice group of Red Deer high on one of the steep slopes that surround us. A Red Deer is then spotted swimming down the river and Helena re-finds one of the Bonelli's Eagles and we are treated to more views of this superb bird-great stuff!

After a most welcome ice-cream we set off to a viewpoint called La Bascula in the hope of seeing another Eagle, this time the rarest Eagle in the world - Spanish Imperial Eagle. There are the ubiquitous Griffons on the wing and we're thrilled when two Spanish Imperial Eagles appear on the horizon, thrills turning to astonishment when a female Goshawk starts chasing them, only to attract the attentions of another pair of Bonelli's Eagles! Distant it maybe, but a contender for magic moment me thinks!

Our final port of call is at Portilla del Tietar , another big Griffon Vulture colony. The high winsome call of Rock Bunting is heard as we walk to the view-point, as is the more strident call of Short-toed Treecreeper. There are lots of vultures wheeling around the cliffs and we've barely set up when a young Golden Eagle appears just above us giving stupendous views as it circles above our heads, finally coming to rest on a ledge just behind us in full view! We've hardly got our breath back when an adult Imperial Eagle appears with the vultures and proceeds to fly above us for half an hour, it's brilliant white epaulettes gleaming in the late afternoon sunshine. With the Goldie behind us and the Imperial above us its difficult to know where to look, nice problem to have mind you!

Finally, as the sun sets, a Blue Rock Thrush delivers its beautiful song from on high, and Greater Horseshoe Bats emerge from their daytime slumber as the Griffon Vultures settle down for the night. Although the Eagle Owl fails to put in an appearance there is still a final use for the telescope as we turn it on Jupiter and its four moons before heading for the medieval town of Trujillo and dinner.

Day 5: We're delighted that our host Juan Pedro will be joining us today and he's very keen to take us to a nature reserve where he saw many Cranes last week. Once again the weather is beautiful and we set off after breakfast towards the areas of rice fields to the south of the hotel. We arrive at the reserve after

about half an hour and start driving the rough tracks towards the areas favoured by the Cranes. There are a few Cranes in various fields but not in the numbers that Juan Pedro saw last week, however we press on and park at the edge of a little orchard overlooking a vast expanse of rice fields. Using a hedge as cover we are able to put the scope on some nearby Cranes that look wonderful in the morning sun. We get our best views of Marsh Harriers as they patrol the area and see lots of little groups of Common Crane, although having just arrived they are very wary and take to the wing as soon as they become aware of us. Walking along the hedgerow we see hundreds of small birds, Tree Sparrows, Spanish Sparrows, Robins, lots of Blackcaps and of course the introduced Waxbills and Avadavats. Before moving on we see a lovely male Hen Harrier fairly close and are able to follow it for a few minutes as it quarters a river bank.

Driving a little further we flush a couple of Green Sandpipers, their white rumps making them very easy to identify, and we follow three Kingfishers that are working the ditches that irrigate the area. Once again there are lots of Pipits and Larks everywhere and Sheila picks out some Tree Sparrows that are feeding on the ground. We see our first geese as a flock of Greylags take to the wing, much more surprising however is the single Canada Goose that flies over. There are lots of Common Buzzards and Marsh Harriers around the fields and we can see that there are hundreds of Common Crane in front of us, so we get out of the van for some scope views. They really are very nervous however, and although we are quite some distance from the main flock some closer birds take to the wing, their nervous calls alerting the main group who also take to the air. What follows is truly spectacular as squadron after squadron pass overhead, their wonderful evocative calls filling our ears, and a sky that is full of birds - magical!

Following Juan Pedro to a local hotel for coffee we have to stop suddenly when a Black-shouldered Kite flies across the road! We manage to re-locate it sitting in a roadside tree and all get a good view as it takes off and disappears from view - wow! After a coffee and cake we make our way to another area that Juan Pedro is keen to show us. There are more Cranes here including a few birds that are actually walking on the road, and we manage to get a little closer this time. Another unusual sighting in the road is an Egyptian Mongoose that slips into the reed-bed before everyone gets a good look, these strange looking animals have been in Spain for centuries and nobody knows how they got here.

We have lunch by the side of some water that has attracted a few Black-headed Gulls and some waders, Green Sandpipers, Greenshank and a few Snipe. A little party of Long-tailed Tits are delightful and a pair of duelling White Wagtails are highly entertaining, however pride of place must go to the Squacco Heron that Annie picks out, a bird that we don't expect to see at this time of year, and we're very pleased when we discover a second one.

A little further along the road we bid farewell to Juan Pedro and go for a little walk along the side of a ditch that has been good for Bluethroat in the past. There are at least ten Little-ringed Plovers in a field and we get great views of an Iberian Shrike, and although we fail to find a Bluethroat we do see more Red Avadavats, including some smart red ones! The plan now is to drive the back roads round to the area of steppe grassland that we started in four days ago. As so often happens with birding though that all changes when driving along we see some flooded fields that are smothered in waders! There are hundreds of Snipe out in the open, and Sue picks out three Black-winged Stilts in flight that thankfully double back and land. Dozens of Kentish Plover are a nice surprise, as are the little flocks of Dunlin and Little Stint that are dotted around this wader paradise. Helena is particularly pleased with the single Avocet here as its a bird she's always wanted to see, and a single Ruff is also a good find. Annie picks out a distant Great Egret but sadly we have to reluctantly drag ourselves away after about an hour if we are going to have any light left for Bustard and Sandgrouse searching! It doesn't take long to locate some Great Bustards near the road and they look incredible in the late afternoon sunshine with absolutely no heat-haze to contend with.

We cant believe our luck a little further along the road when we see a big group of Sandgrouse fairly close, but just as we are about to set up scopes the local constabulary arrive and respectfully ask us to move on. It's a fair cop, and after such a fantastic day we're in no mood to argue, so with a beautiful sunset to look at we head back to the hotel for our final dinner together and magic moments!

Species of the trip is dominated by raptors with five votes for Imperial Eagle, Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle and Iberian Grey Shrike (which is a kind of honorary raptor!) Place of the trip is unanimous - MONFRAGUE! And finally, magic moments are typically much more varied with Avocet, Spotted Redshank (guide reaction!) Eagle sightings and duelling raptors.

Day 6: After bidding farewell to our wonderful hosts we head off up the road towards Madrid. We're not flying until this afternoon, so we have a little time for some birding on the way. We make a stop at some reed-beds near a power station, our main targets here being Purple Swamp Hen and the possibility of Black-shouldered Kite. The water levels are high and the reeds are thick and although we can hear Swamp Hens calling it appears as though they are going to be tricky to see. Cetti's Warblers call from deep in cover and we hear Penduline Tit, but the only birds showing are Coots and Moorhens. We try the other side of the road and are almost immediately rewarded when a Swamp Hen explodes from the reeds in front of us and flies across the water to another reed-bed. Rather surprisingly, instead of slipping out of sight it puts on a great show as it feeds and preens in the open, and we all get terrific views of this almost pre-historic looking bird.

There is then great excitement when we find a distant Black-shouldered Kite that gradually works its way towards us, allowing everyone to follow it in the scope as it hovers now and then. It perches on a nearby pylon and through the scope we can see from its scaly back that it is a young bird. Some distant Black Vultures are joined by Griffons that eventually float overhead, and with the Kite still sitting on the pylon our time runs out and we make our way towards Madrid after what has been another superb adventure in Extremadura.

Birds

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Squacco Heron
White Stork
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Gadwall
Wigeon
Mallard
Pintail
Teal
Black-shouldered Kite
Red Kite
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Common Buzzard
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge(Heard)
Moorhen
Purple Swamp Hen
Coot
Water Rail(Heard)
Common Crane
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Ruff
Little-ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Lapwing
Snipe

Green Sandpiper
Greenshank
Spotted Redshank
Dunlin
Little Stint
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Wood Pigeon
Feral Pigeon
Collared Dove
Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Calandra Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Skylark
Woodlark(Heard)
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Robin
Bluethroat
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Fan-tailed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap
Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Short-toed
Trecreeper(Heard)
Iberian Grey Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie

Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Red Avadavat
Common Waxbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Rock Bunting(Heard)
Reed Bunting
Corn Bunting

Mammals

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Red Deer
Red Fox
Egyptian Mongoose
Greater Horseshoe Bat

Reptiles and Amphibians

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Stripeless Frog
Iberian Wall Lizard

Butterflies

Small White
Western Dappled White
Small Copper
Lang's Short-tailed Blue
Brown Argus
Small Tortoiseshell
Red Admiral
Clouded Yellow

Odonata

Red-veined Darter
Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly
Broad-bodied Chaser