

SECRET SPAIN - BIRDING IN EXTREMADURA – Friday 15th - Monday 18th March 2013



Friday 15th March

We met at Stansted Airport for our flight down to Madrid and arriving on time, were soon on our way, traversing the ring road and heading down south westwards towards Extremadura.

There were plenty of RED KITES and COMMON BUZZARDS along the motorway, interspersed with COMMON KESTRELS and good numbers of WHITE STORKS. After around 1 hour 30 we took a break and had good views of GRIFFON VULTURES overhead, whilst SWALLOWS sang from nearby buildings. A few BLACK KITES were present soaring over the fields.

Turning off the motorway, we had brief views of a BLACK-WINGED KITE and then we arrived at a large reservoir to find a PURPLE SWAMPHEN which we had really good views of in the reeds. Plenty more were seen in the vast reedbeds and they certainly were noisy.

A WATER RAIL flitted along the reed edge and a lovely surprise were a pair of LITTLE BITTERNS that flew along the ditch, the male coming right past us! There was plenty to see here and the blue skies and warm sunshine really felt good after the British weather! Over the next 30 minutes or so we had good views of KINGFISHER, ZITTING CISTICOLA, SPANISH SPARROW, IBERIAN GREY SHRIKE and quite a few CHIFFCHAFFS.

Moving position proved advantageous when a stunning male BLUETHROAT perched right in front of us as well as yet more PURPLE SWAMPHENS, CHIFFCHAFFS, GREAT WHITE EGRET and CORN BUNTINGS. With time on our side we drove a short distance to a nearby town where good numbers of LESSER KESTRELS performed overhead. Driving along the road we spotted another BLACK-WINGED KITE, but as soon as we stopped it flew off west.

We arrived at our accommodation 45 minutes later and were welcomed by our host and his family and whilst being shown to our rooms and given a guided tour of the hotel, 13 SPOONBILL flew over heading north, a surprising sighting indeed.

After a wash and brush up we were invited to join the family for pre-dinner drinks and to sample the local meats and cheeses of the area.

After completing the bird list we enjoyed a fantastic meal of Chickpeas with Pistou, Chicken and Figs cooked in wine served with salad and Rice followed by Apple Tart, which was washed down with a very easy drinking Rioja with an Acorn Liqueur.

Whilst the food was being enjoyed, the children gave us a wonderful recital of classical music including the National Anthem!

We all went to bed content and very much looking forward to the next day.

Saturday 16th March

Most of the group met at 7.15am for a pre-breakfast walk around the hotel. The light levels increased as we wandered down the lane noting several SERIN, SARDINIAN WARBLER, BLACKCAP and CORN BUNTINGS. After the previous nights' dinner we needed a bit of fresh air and exercise! We then had a good breakfast and loaded up the van to drive the short distance to Trujillo for a visit to the bullring. At least four pairs of LESSER KESTRELS sat on rooftops, along with a small number of SPOTLESS STARLINGS and HOUSE SPARROWS. A few HOUSE MARTINS hawked over houses and a pair of HOOPOE put on a good show in front of us.

Leaving the area we drove northwards towards Monfrague National Park stopping along the way. Unfortunately, rain started to fall steadily which made viewing unpleasant, but in grassy fields we managed to find WOODLARK, STONECHAT and a pair of BLACK REDSTART. Flying over the river were a selection of hirundines including RED-RUMPED SWALLOW, HOUSE MARTIN, SWALLOW and CRAG MARTIN. A female MERLIN dashed through the flock scattering them everywhere.

Taking the chance to try and outwit the weather we headed northwards, which paid off as the weather brightened when we reached a watchpoint and good numbers of GRIFFON VULTURES were taking to the air.

A scan through the flocks produced a PEREGRINE, which dived down through them whilst on a distant hillside. A sub-adult EGYPTIAN VULTURE sat on the ground and a male BLACK REDSTART flitted around on rocks below us. Also a stunning male BLUE ROCK THRUSH perched in full view. After a brief stop for facilities, we drove on towards another watchpoint. Plenty of GRIFFON VULTURES were present as well as BLACK VULTURE, BLACK KITE, KESTREL and two SHORT-TOED EAGLES displaying.

After a coffee break we scanned the hillsides thoroughly, our patience being rewarded with good views of an adult SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE soaring over the hillside and mobbing a GRIFFON VULTURE that was sitting innocently on a hill! The rocky hillsides were alive with wildflowers including HOOP-PETTICOAT NARCISSI and ANGEL'S TEARS NARCISSI. Other notable flowers included SPANISH HEATH, ROSEMARY and FRENCH LAVENDER.

Delighted by our views of the eagle, we wandered back to the van for a spot of lunch which went down very well indeed. Moving back southwards, we stopped at a couple of spots noting RAVEN, JAY and a few AZURE-WINGED MAGPIES before carrying on our journey through the park.

Then Steve spotted a raptor flying into a tree and a quick scan proved it to be a stunning adult BONELLI'S EAGLE, which after a quick about turn in the minibus gave excellent views before it flew off. With some time spare we left the park and visited a site that had previously been good for Black-winged Kite but despite a thorough search, it failed to produce.

With the weather looking dodgy we drove southwards back to Trujillo, where on the outskirts we watched a GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO flying alongside the van. Once in the town, we headed

to a pond where the last 15 minutes of our birding day was spent. Two RED-RUMPED SWALLOWS hawked over the water and a GREEN SANDPIPER fed in a muddy corner.

After arriving back at the hotel a little later than planned, we met up after an hour or so for a drink and to complete the bird list. Dinner was again fantastic with a starter of Vegetables cooked with smoked Parika, followed by a traditional Spanish dish of Migas, consisting of fried breadcrumbs, Green Pepper, lardons, Chorizo and Fried Egg served with a tomato and onion salad, which when mixed up tasted pretty good. Dessert was Rice Pudding with Melon Jam and the meal was concluded with Acorn Liqueur. Steve enjoyed a chocolate cake as it was his Birthday!

We all went to bed happy with the birding day and once again looked forward to what the next day should bring.

Sunday 17th March

We opted to avoid the morning walk due to the weather looking decidedly dodgy, but after a spot of early morning rain it actually turned out to be a good morning. Leaving the hotel we drove westwards to the steppe land. Our first scan of the ridges produced good numbers of singing CALANDRA LARKS, IBERIAN GREY SHRIKE and around 10 RAVEN. With clouds high in the sky we took a walk along a drovers track and hadn't got far when a small party of GREAT BUSTARD were spotted on the skyline. Eventually they flew off and in flight they looked magnificent.

CORN BUNTINGS sang from fenceposts almost every few feet and good numbers of THEKLA LARK were noted. On reaching the crest of the hill we came to a cattle pen, where there was an old tractor and in the driving seat was a superb LITTLE OWL! Plenty of noisy SPANISH SPARROWS frequented the area along with SKYLARK and MEADOW PIPIT.

From the top of the ridge we had good views over surrounding countryside and more GREAT BUSTARDS were seen numbering about 30 birds, which included a good proportion of displaying males. Suddenly the air was alive with the calls of PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE and they were seen in flight but unfortunately, dropped down on the other side of the ridge.

With skies darkening we retraced our steps and wandered back for a coffee and cake break at the van. Then taking a chance we drove down a farm track and although there were plenty of CORN BUNTINGS, it was pretty quiet, but on our return journey we were delighted to find the flock of PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE, numbering around 90 birds.

Leaving the area we popped in to the accommodation to use the facilities before driving south for lunch. Around 1000 SHOVELER were seen loafing on the main part of a reservoir, along with GREAT CRESTED GREBE and MALLARD. RED-RUMPED and BARN SWALLOWS hawked close to the dam, whilst BLACK REDSTARTS fed on the dam walls. Back along the road, on the journey in, we had brief views of a wheatear species and as we drove away, there sat a stunning male BLACK-EARED WHEATEAR! Plenty of wildflowers were noted including BARBARY NUT and SAWFLY ORCHID amongst others.

From the top of the dam we had good views all around and noted GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO, MARSH HARRIER, WHITE STORKS, BLACK KITES and a single GREAT WHITE EGRET.

With time getting on we drove down the road and had brief views of a female WOODCHAT SHRIKE perched by the road, but were unable to stop. Taking a farm track we drove along the edge of some rice fields was very productive. Small numbers of BLACK-HEADED GULLS were on open fields, along with COMMON SNIPE and a small party of BLACK-TAILED GODWITS. In the reedy margins we had brief views of COMMON WAXBILLS, whilst the song of CETTI'S WARBLERS reverberated around the area. At the back of a rice paddy we discovered what looked like a summer plumaged Snow Bunting, but after rushing to get the scope on it, the bird turned out to be a partial albino PIED WAGTAIL - all white with black wings and yellow bill!

Stopping on higher ground proved advantageous with a male HEN HARRIER hunting the margins and not far along the road we found IBERIAN GREAT SHRIKE and two male SUBALPINE WARBLERS.

Changing scenery we drove to another area of steppe where yet more GREAT BUSTARDS were found and in the opposite fields a small flock of GOLDEN PLOVER as well as three male LITTLE BUSTARDS. Scanning the hillsides yielded around 20 more GREAT BUSTARDS and 40 LITTLE BUSTARDS in flight. Along the roadside we watched HOOPOE and FAN-TAILED WARBLER before meeting an English couple who gave us a tip off on a Stone Curlew site. On our way there we had brief views of a female WOODCHAT SHRIKE before stopping and scanning, which produced around 7 STONE CURLEW. After a tea break we headed back to base through a torrential downpour but considering the atrocious forecast, the day had turned out well.

Dinner was again fantastic with Potato and Bread Soup to start followed by Beef and Pear Stew and a superb Salad of cabbage, carrot, sunflower seeds and apple. Dessert was Chocolate Mousse with Chocolate Cake and this was washed down with Rioja followed by coffee or tea and the obligatory Acorn Liqueur.

Monday 18th March

After breakfast, we said our goodbyes to our hosts and after loading up the van headed northwards. On arrival at our site the wind blew quite strongly which made viewing difficult so we tried a couple of different areas and this proved productive with the sheltered Cork Oaks providing home for both WOODCHAT and IBERIAN GREY SHRIKES and the wet pools and irrigation ditches yielded a pair of BLACK-WINGED STILT and both GREEN and COMMON SANDPIPERS.

The last pool we visited had at least three GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOOS chasing MAGPIES and the reed-fringed edge held a stunning male PENDULINE TIT feeding on reedmace. A SPARROWHAWK flew low over the pools and overhead we watched BLACK KITE, EGYPTIAN, BLACK and GRIFFON VULTURES and a few COMMON BUZZARDS.

With time running out we retraced our steps, noting a male DARTFORD WARBLER feeding along a wall, before packing away cameras and bins for our journey north to Madrid. We made good time and after getting fuel and dropping off the van, checked in early and spent time in the departure lounge relaxing before our flight.

Arriving back in the UK ahead of schedule, we said our goodbyes after what had been a great trip with so many good birding highlights, not forgetting fine food, wine and great company.