

Spain

Spanish Steppes in Winter

Sun 24th – Sat 30th January 2016



Trip photos (clockwise, from top left): Griffon Vultures warming up in the morning were a feature of Monfrague • Part of a flock of Little Bustards that 'whistled' past us on the open grasslands • A Little Owl looks surprised to see us • Common Cranes feeding on acorns in the dehesa • © tour leader Mike Crewe/Limosa Holidays

**report compiled by tour leader:
Mike Crewe**

Spain | The Spanish Steppes in Winter

Tour Leaders: Mike Crewe & Fernando Enrique

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A winter get-away from the grey skies of home always sounds like a good idea and, for many of us Spain is an obvious choice, being relatively close at hand and offering experiences very different to those at home. However, it is not the Spanish *costas* that birdwatchers head to in winter, it's the delights of Extremadura, with its fabulous mix of open woodland, rolling grassland, rugged mountains and extensive wetlands – coupled with a fine tradition of serving great food and the best Spanish wines. On this visit, we found the weather to be similar to the UK, but everything else was very different; starting on the semi-steppe grazing lands around Trujillo, we watched stately parties of Great Bustards strolling across the plains, parties of Little Bustards wing-whistled overhead and vast flocks of Northern Lapwings, Golden Plovers and a bewilderingment of larks, sparrows, finches and buntings whirred up from the roadsides as we passed.

The famous *dehesas* of Round-leaved and Cork Oaks provided ample opportunity for us to enjoy busy flocks of Iberian Magpies, moth-like Hoopoes, manic Serins and secretive Hawfinches and Short-toed Treecreepers, while the scented banks of Gum Cistus on higher ground provided us with skulking Dartford and Sardinian Warblers. An extensive complex of both man-made and natural water courses provided great opportunities for us to work through huge flotillas of ducks, grebes and coots (despite some foggy weather at times!) and scanning the large gatherings finally turned up two Ferruginous Ducks and a Ring-necked Duck.

With all this activity, it is not surprising that raptors were much in evidence and seldom a moment seemed to pass without there being a Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard or Griffon Vulture in view. To add to the variety, Cinereous (Black) Vultures cruised the rugged hills around Monfragüe, Black-winged Kites courted over the *dehesa* and Hen Harriers hassled the songbird flocks, while one of the trip highlights must surely have been the pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles that cruised with the Griffons and gave perfect opportunity to enjoy this very rare species.

Then of course, there were the Cranes – hundreds, if not thousands of them, seemingly everywhere we looked, whether they were digging up roots in the rice fields, or picking out fallen acorns under the oak trees, and all the time their bugling calls provided a backdrop to our birding. It was almost too much – but not quite! Amazing birding with a great group, and some of the finest hospitality you will get anywhere; and the food! The food was amazing and a real taste of the real Spain, with so many of our meals made up of local produce, much of which came from the garden of our wonderful rural hotel.

Daily Diary

Day 1 – Sunday, January 24th 2016

An early flight from London got us into Madrid around lunchtime where the 'Brits' met up with local guide Fernando, and our four participants who had arrived from California the day before. Getting out of Madrid Airport was the first test for the guides and Yours Truly was found wanting! However, since I get the task of writing the tour report, I get the privilege of skipping over this and leaping straight to the wonderful tapas lunch that nicely broke our journey to Extremadura...

Well sated, we continued on our way and, before long, we were pulling off for a birding break and a leg stretch. Our stop at a small nature reserve gave us close but brief views of Western Swamphens, and our first taste of just how 'birdy' this trip was going to be – a Hoopoe bounced past and sat nicely for the 'scopes in a nearby tree, Common Chiffchaffs seemed to be feeding everywhere and a Penduline Tit wheezed from the bulrush beds. Refreshed by this birding extravaganza, we completed our journey and checked into our rooms, before enjoying our first taste of Belen's amazing Extremaduran cuisine – something that would become a major feature throughout the week.

Day 2 – Monday, January 25th 2016

A sunny start to the day was welcome this morning as we headed out soon after breakfast and began our adventure on the open grazing lands north of Trujillo. We were soon into the amazing bird-richness of these habitats, as Stonechats and Corn Buntings flirted on seemingly every fence line, Thekla and Crested Larks ran across the open grass, and swirling flocks of Linnets, Goldfinches, House Sparrows and Spanish Sparrows greeted our passing. The almost wader-like profile of Calandra Larks was a feature of some areas, but our quest was for bigger quarry. Turning off onto a dirt road, we were soon pulling up to scan through flocks of Northern Lapwings and Golden Plovers... Perseverance paid off as Fernando homed in on a Sociable Lapwing – a critically endangered species from Central Asia that had no business being here, but we were grateful that it had come this way.

Having earlier seen a single male Great Bustard in flight, we were delighted to chance across a close party of 15 of these chunky yet graceful birds and we were to find more during the day, allowing us to see how this species splits into single-sex flocks during the winter. Little Bustards have become much scarcer in recent years – for reasons which are as yet not fully clear – but we were treated to some fine views of this species today, including parties of fly-over birds, which allowed us to hear the whistling sound made by the wings of the males, due to their shortened fourth primary. Completing the set of steppe specialists we were hoping for today, we had great 'scope views of a flock of some 35 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse feeding on a ridge, then enjoyed good fly-over views of a party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

A coffee and restroom stop was much appreciated, and also provided us with our first Blue Rock Thrush, close-up views of White Storks attending nests and busy Barn Swallows. Lunch soon beckoned, and we enjoyed our picnic beside the Rio Magasca, where a Golden Eagle was a fine interruption as we watched Crag Martins, Grey Wagtails and Spanish Pond Terrapins along the river.

As the terrain became more rugged, we were soon picking up parties of Griffon Vultures, and located a group on the ground, which appeared to have been attracted down by the demise of a local sheep. Here too we enjoyed great views of several Cinereous Vultures (Black Vulture will always be the name we Brits use I am sure!) and our continuing journey provided us with a good array of Red Kites, Common Buzzards and Marsh Harriers. Eventually our circular route brought us back to Trujillo and we head back to the hotel for more fine hospitality.

Day 3 – Tuesday, January 26th 2016

A foggy start gave us cause for concern, but we stuck with our plan to visit Monfragüe National Park and this turned out to be a good choice. All visits to this wonderful park seem to start at the impressive rock outcrop of Pena Falcon and here the shrouds of mist gave the place a really ethereal look. At first, the grunts and chitters of the Griffons were the only indication of their presence, but before long, the mist was lifting and we were treated to some wonderful birding as the vultures stretched their wings and warmed their backs or bellies in the face of the rising sun. Habituated Great and Blue Tits stopped by to see if we had any

scraps, Hawfinches, Blue Rock Thrushes and a Short-toed Treecreeper showed well and several juvenile Cinereous Vultures posed on the rocks. A superb male Firecrest disported himself before us and Blackcaps and Sardinian Warblers fed on wild olives. An Otter mooching around on the opposite bank was a nice bonus here too.

A stop provided us with a fine male Black Redstart, several House Martins and some obliging Thekla Larks, then we were on our way again, passing several grazing Red Deer on our way to our lunch stop, which was accompanied by parties of Hawfinches and Long-tailed Tits. After lunch, we watched more Griffons then were treated to fabulous and prolonged views of a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, a real treat as this is Europe's rarest eagle.

Eventually we found ourselves among Cork Oaks on the far side of the reserve and began our return journey, though not before we had good looks at a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Driving back through the park gave us more opportunities to enjoy the parties of Iberian Magpies that abound here, before we were heading back to base and preparing for some fine tasting sessions of olive oil and Spanish wines.

Day 4 – Wednesday, January 27th 2016

Having savoured the *dehesa* and open grasslands, then the rugged hills of the area, we had another complete change of venue today. Heading south from the hotel, we began our birding at one of the many local reservoirs, but had to struggle with foggy conditions for quite some time. Smudgy shapes in the gloom did eventually reveal themselves as an array of ducks, with Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal and Gadwall being the most common. Eventually, our perseverance paid off and, through occasional breaks in the mist, we worked through a party of Tufted Duck and Common Pochard and eventually turned up two Ferruginous Ducks and a female Ring-necked Duck. Though we had needed to wait for these birds, our time here was not wasted, as we enjoyed the toing and froing of a pair of Common Kingfishers (much to Jane's delight), Common Chiffchaffs seemed to be feeding everywhere, and a pair of Sardinian Warblers gave great views.

Checking out a larger section of the main reservoir, we found good numbers of Great Crested, Black-necked and Little Grebes, Northern Pintail and Eurasian Coots to add to our list, as well as a surprising gathering of some 30 or so Common Shelducks, a species not typically found in any number in this area. A restroom stop beckoned, then it was time for lunch, which we took in the crumbling, colonial surrounds of Madrigalejo railway station, a place that apparently last saw a train in 1964 and now provides access to a wonderful long-distance trail through the region. Despite a thorough search, no stone-curlews could be found here, though we did get a fine introduction into the rather zany vocalisations of the local shrikes.

After lunch, we toured just a fraction of the immense ricefield complex around Madrigalejo and Vegas Altas, with seemingly every inch of our journey accompanied by Common Cranes. Most birds were in family groups, mum and dad with one or sometimes two youngsters, digging for food in the ricefields and giving wonderful views. Occasionally, lines of cranes would rise in the distance and spread across the horizon, their bugling calls a constant backdrop to our birding. Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails were plentiful here, as were buzzing groups of Red Avadavats, that always seemed to rocket away just before we got a really good look at them! With careful attention, Water Pipits could be noted calling in flight too, and we eventually managed to get good looks at some. Another species we were particularly keen to find here was Bluethroat, and Fernando's local knowledge ensured we weren't disappointed as we managed to get both males and females of this great bird in the 'scopes.

Day 5 – Thursday, January 28th 2016

Another dull start greeted us today, with fog again hanging throughout the area, but today we also had to put up with light but persistent drizzle. Undaunted, we headed through some nice oakwoods and birded from the vehicles for a while, notching up good views of several Hoopes, Woodlark, Mistle Thrush and a nice range of finches, as well as many Common Cranes. Our journey took us down to the shores of the immense Sierra Brava reservoir and we spent a little time scanning the waters. Northern Pintail and Great Crested Grebes were most in evidence, and a Common Sandpiper teetered along the muddy edges. Cruising back out, we headed for higher ground and soon found ourselves pulling up to enjoy parties of both male and female Great Bustards, the males putting on a little tail-fanning and wing stretching as the rain finally came to a halt and we all looked forward to drying out a little.

Our route took us to the small town of Campo Lugar and here we finally caught up with the one species that had been eluding us – Stone-curlew. Outside the breeding season, this species tends to congregate at traditional gathering sites and here we found ourselves staring eye to eye with a sizeable group of around 60 of these peculiar birds. Restrooms again beckoned, so we made our way across to Madrigalejo and availed ourselves of the facilities in town again, before enjoying another picnic lunch near the railway station, accompanied by the intriguing songs of Spotless Starlings.

We spent our afternoon around the Finca Moheda Alta reserve, where a fine mix of *dehesa* and rice fields gave us some excellent birding. Initially, however, we had bad luck, as a visit to a small reservoir resulted in all the ducks promptly flying away and not returning! Still, we finally managed good 'scope views of Red Avadavats, before moving to another section of the area and being treated to some wonderful courtship behaviour by a pair of Black-winged Kites. Another highlight here was the gathering of shorebirds, which included plenty of Black-winged Stilts, six Ruff, a Wood Sandpiper and several Common Snipe.

We headed back earlier today, to give ourselves time to get cleaned up and to head into Trujillo for a wonderful traditional Extremaduran meal – complete with wine of course!

Day 6 – Friday, January 29th 2016

Yesterday's rain had cleared the area and we awoke to a chilly but clear morning, with just a little localised mist in the valleys. Yet more new experiences were to come our way today, as we headed up into the craggy peaks of the Sierra de Guadalupe. Our first stop was beside one of the local rivers, where we searched for Rock Buntings. Our quarry decided it wasn't going to be obliging this year, but we nevertheless enjoyed a feeding party of Eurasian Siskins and an all-too-brief White-throated Dipper whizzed by. Continuing our journey we passed through evergreen oaks that gave way to woods of Spanish Chestnut, then scrubby stands of Pyrenean Oak and open heathland, where pink heaths were already in flower. The higher stands of scrubby oaks provided us with a mixed feeding party which included a Goldcrest and at least two Coal Tits.

Lunch was taken at Villuercas at 1603m above sea level which, though chilly and with patches of low cloud whispering through, nevertheless offered spectacular views of the surrounding countryside – even as far as Trujillo. But there was still more birding to be had and our searches of suitable rocky habitat failed to produce our target birds. That is, until we decided it was time to start heading for home. As we drove slowly downhill, a flock of 11 birds drifted over the cars and dropped into the rocks – Alpine Accentors!! After a thorough search of the area, we eventually tracked them down and enjoyed great views as they scurried around the rocks. Lower down, we also managed to connect with a pair of European Nuthatches that sat up nicely for us, but an Iberian Green Woodpecker decided that a single fly-by was all we deserved...

Day 7 – Saturday, January 30th 2016

Localised fog hampered our departure this morning as we returned to try and get better views of the swamphens, but those who persevered did get flight views, while the rest of us were discovering that the local toilets were locked for the day! Our luck improved at our second stop when a male Black Wheatear sat up and sang his heart out for us – a little distant, but there's not too much plumage detail to get to grips with on this bird!

Our Extremaduran adventure was sadly coming to an end, but we rounded off with a final picnic lunch, made the airport in good time (I can't believe Fernando actually punched the air in celebration of this achievement!!) and said farewell to the Californian contingent, who were heading into Madrid for another few days of Spanish culture.

Many thanks to all for your part in making this a wonderful winter break, full of good company, great food and drink and fabulous birding. But the jokes, Jane... what do you think?

Annotated List of Birds Recorded (n=133)

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Small numbers most days – elusive since they taste good!

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

At least 65 seen at the rice fields on 27th and five at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th.

Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiaca*

As in the UK, this is an introduced species here, with 20 or so birds noted at Alcollarin on 27th.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

A surprising find of around 30 at Alcollarin on 27th.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Two at Saucedilla on 24th then good numbers at the reservoirs on 27th and 28th.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Small numbers noted at the reservoirs on 27th and 28th.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Widespread at wetlands throughout the area.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Abundant at the reservoirs visited on 27th and 28th.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

Fair numbers noted at the reservoirs on 27th and 28th.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Fair numbers noted at the reservoirs on 27th and 28th.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

A good scattering of birds at Alcollarin on 27th.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya fuligula*

A pair eventually seen quite well when the fog started to lift at Alcollarin on 27th.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*

A female of this North American species was known to have been in the area and was eventually found with other diving ducks at Alcollarin on 27th.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

A good number of birds seen at Alcollarin on 27th.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Two at Saucedilla on 24th and good numbers on the reservoirs we visited on 27th and 28th.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

A good number birds on the larger reservoirs on 27th and 28th, with some already well into breeding plumage.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

At least a dozen noted at Alcollarin on 27th.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Plentiful throughout the area, with many birds attending nests and the occasional 'bill-clapping' display heard.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Three juveniles at Alcollarin on 27th were unexpected at this time of year.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Common and noted daily, especially around cattle herds, but also commonly following the plough in the rice fields.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Small numbers noted daily throughout.

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Small numbers of overwintering birds on three dates, with a maximum of six on 27th.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Noted in small numbers on four dates with a maximum of 20 on 27th.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Noted at wetlands daily with small numbers on all the rivers and main reservoirs visited.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

A regular roadside bird with one to eight noted daily.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

A juvenile male was found sitting on a wall north of Trujillo on 25th.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

One to two noted on four dates and causing havoc with the lapwing and songbird flocks!

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

One at Saucedilla on 24th, then wonderful views of a pair courting and hunting at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Noted daily throughout and best seen around the sheep flocks on the grasslands.

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Many pairs were already attending their nests at Monfrague and we were able to get wing tag details from several birds, which had been marked as part of a widespread project to look at the movements of these birds.

Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Six seen well in flight on 25th and at least 10 noted around Monfrague on 26th, including a number of juveniles.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

A common feature of open areas, both around the rice fields and on the open grasslands.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

A superb adult male noted on the Monroy road on 25th and two around the rice fields on 28th.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Singles noted at Saucedilla on 24th and in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Roadside birds noted daily throughout.

Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*

Excellent views of a resident pair in Monfrague National Park on 26th.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

An adult seen well by the Rio Magasca at our lunch stop was one of two seen there on 25th. Some also managed to note one as we headed back to Madrid on the last day.

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata*

A distant pair went through the early stages of courtship over the grasslands north of Trujillo on 25th.

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*

A key bird for this trip and they did us proud; droves of birds were seen well on the

grasslands north of Trujillo and in the Campo Lugar area. Most of the birds seen were males, including some well-whiskered, mature birds, but we also saw a gathering of at least 15 females.

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*

This species is currently going through a long-term downward trend in numbers and is much harder to find than it once was. Nevertheless, we enjoyed some nice sightings, including a flock of 24 along the Monroy road, which flew past us very close and allowed us to clearly hear the whistling of the wings of the males.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

At least two heard calling at Saucedilla on 24th, but they typically remained in deep cover.

Western Swamphe *Porphyrio porphyrio*

Formerly Purple Gallinule, this species is doing quite well in southwest Europe and it continues to spread into new territory in Spain. Several birds were heard calling and a couple were seen on and off as they moved around in the large stands of bulrushes at Saucedilla on 24th. One was seen again briefly there on 30th.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

A scattering of birds, including a flock of around 30 birds, in the rice fields on 27th and 28th. Also one at Saucedilla on 30th.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Abundant on the larger reservoirs that we visited, and smaller numbers noted at Saucedilla.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

A major feature of the holiday, with wonderful views and sounds of these birds on a daily basis. While the acorns of the Round-leaved Oaks have long been attraction for these birds in the winter, doubtless the great feeding opportunities around the relatively new rice field complexes in the area make this a heaven on earth for this species.

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus*

After missing them at Madrigalejo, we eventually pinned down a winter flock of 60 near Campo Lugar on 28th which gave great 'scope views – though they were a little skittish.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

At least 40 birds on wet rice fields at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Plentiful on the grasslands of Extremadura with large flocks noted on a daily basis.

Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*

Bonus bird of the trip! This had been in the area for around three weeks and we were lucky to find it still present on 25th. Numbers of this species have declined precipitously in the past 25 years or so, most likely because of loss of habitat in its Central Asian breeding grounds, and severe hunting pressure on migration and during the winter. It feels like a real privilege to be in the presence of one these days.

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Not as common as Northern Lapwing, but still good numbers noted on the grasslands on several days.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Just two noted on our first visit to the rice fields on 27th, but at least 30 were noted there on 28th.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

One at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th was a nice bonus for the trip.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Three birds noted on 27th, including one on the dam at Alcollarin, then a single bird in the rice fields on 28th.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

One at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th was a surprise and really should have been wintering a long way south of here!

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Four singletons noted during the week at a variety of wetland habitats.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

A party of six males was at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Small numbers noted around the grasslands but much larger numbers were wintering around the rice fields.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Not recorded in Extremadura, but one or two seen around Madrid-Barajas Airport on our arrival on 24th.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Frequently seen in small numbers daily, especially around the rice field complexes. All birds seen well enough were relatively light-backed and appeared to be of the western form *graellsii*.

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*

Some great 'scope views of this species during our day out on the open grasslands on 25th, with a total of around 45 birds noted during the day.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*

A little more elusive than the previous species, but we saw a couple of small parties very well in flight, then managed to find a group of six distantly on the ground. In all we totalled around 15 birds on 25th, and also heard the species calling at Campo Lugar on 28th.

Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Noted throughout the tour with a wide range of colour forms present...

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

A nice addition of one perched for a short while in the *dehesa* north of Trujillo on 25th.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Very common, with high-flying flocks noted on a daily basis.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Small numbers noted daily, plus one or two larger gatherings at favoured feeding locations around towns and grain silos.

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

One noted on 26th and one seen close to the road near Campo Lugar on 28th, which played cat and mouse with us.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Persistence paid off and we eventually had good views of an active pair at Alcollarin on 27th.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Always a celebrity! You can never see too many of these birds, and we managed to see good numbers – almost always in pairs – on a daily basis.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*

Great views of two single males seen around Monfrague National Park on 26th.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Singles noted at Monfrague on 26th and in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Iberian Green Woodpecker *Picus sharpei*

A sneaky bird gave us a brief fly-by in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th but refused to come out again...

Iberian Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Currently Southern Grey Shrike, more taxonomic changes seem likely with this complex group of birds. A relatively common species in Extremadura with roadside singles and pairs noted on a regular basis. As Fernando pointed out on a number of occasions, any strange sound emanating from the landscape seems likely to be made by this species!

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Elusive and shy, singles were heard but not seen at Monfrague on 26th and the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Iberian Magpie *Cyanopica cooki*

One of the star birds of the holiday, this species is now recognised as an Iberian endemic, after long having been thought to have been possibly introduced from the Far East by early

traders. This idea was laid to rest after sub-fossil bones of this species were found in caves in Gibraltar, dating the species' existence in the area to well before a time when any traders could have brought them here. Winter flocks of this bird can be impressive and on at least a couple of occasions we watched parties of 50 or so birds trailing through the oaks near our hotel.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Common and widespread, but well upstaged by the previous species!

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Local, but can occur in good numbers, such as around Madrigalejo.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Two to six noted on a daily basis throughout the tour.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

A localised species in Extremadura and we managed brief glimpses of a couple of birds in a mixed feeding flock in wind-blown stands of Pyrenean Oak in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Great Tit *Parus major*

Widespread and common in woodland and around habitation.

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Widespread and common in woodland and around habitation.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

So near, yet so far... One called and breezed into the bulrushes at Saucedilla on 24th but quickly disappeared.

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Common in suitable habitat and noted around rocky outcrops and old bridges on most days. Also occasionally joined other hirundines over open water.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Fair numbers seemed to be wintering in the area with small numbers seen daily and gatherings of up to 50 birds at some of the larger reservoirs.

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Again, a few birds seemed to be successfully riding out this mild winter we are having and up to 10 birds were noted on four dates at a variety of sites.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Not uncommon in the more rugged areas around Monfrague and the Sierra de Guadalupe, with some good close views of birds at the former site, allowing us to see the subtle plumage differences between these and British birds.

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Common in suitable habitat, with the largest numbers seeming to favour land where there had been at least some cultivation. The wonderful rolling song of this species, with much mimicry thrown in, as well as its distinctive long wings with dark undersides and white trailing edges are a great feature of the area.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Widespread and common and often filling the niche of a European roadrunner!

Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae*

Widespread but local and more often in uncultivated areas and areas of rocky ground than is the case for Crested Lark. Some obliging birds allowed close views, revealing their heavily spotted chests and stubbier bills, as well as their distinctive contact calls.

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Common on the open grasslands and around the rice fields, with birds mostly seen in roaming flocks, undulating across the landscape.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Always a delight, pairs and small parties of this species were noted on four dates and the species was often one of the first to break into song around the hotel in the mornings.

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

Little skulkers, but we had some good views of roadside pairs on a couple of occasions. Widespread in small numbers and logged on our lists on three dates.

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Top award for skulking always goes to this species, which has no physical form – just a voice on the breeze! Heard daily but we never found the time to really pin one down.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Delightfully common and active everywhere, especially around the margins of waterways. We had some wonderful close encounters during our foggy morning at Alcollarin on 27th.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Often heard calling around the hotel and in wooded and scrubby areas elsewhere. Seen well around Monfrague, where birds were feeding on wild olives.

Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata*

Widespread on shrubby hillsides but needs a little work to see well. Small numbers were encountered on four dates.

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Widespread and common, though often just represented by a flirty tail bouncing into the undergrowth or across the road. A pair showed very well at Alcollarin on 27th.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Always a stunning bird, we had great close views of one at Pena Falcon on 26th and others were calling in the oak woods on 26th and 30th.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

One seen well in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th was a good bird for this tour.

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Another ace skulker, but common and widespread with birds regularly noted around the hotel and in suitable habitat throughout the area. One gave prolonged views at Pena Falcon on 26th.

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

One showed very well at Pena Falcon on 26th and others were heard singing around the hotel and in oak woodland on three dates.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

A species that favours larger stands of mature woodland, we enjoyed close views of a pair on the lower slopes of the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Present in mixed flocks with Spotless Starlings, but we didn't find time to make a good assessment of the percentage of each species present.

Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*

Widespread and very common. The song of this species is very different to that of Common Starling, though both species use much mimicry, and the rolling notes of Spotless Starlings were a regular feature of towns and villages in the area, as well as out in the *dehesa*.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Widespread in small numbers and noted daily.

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Shy and retiring, one to three birds noted daily, mostly around the hotel first thing in the morning. Sadly, this fast-declining species continues to be shot for pleasure in parts of southern Europe...

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Two birds seen by some of the group in *dehesa* near Sierra Brava reservoir on 28th.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Widespread in small numbers and always a component of dawn chorus at the hotel each morning.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

Find the right habitat and you will find the bird! After a brief scan in the rice fields, we notched up a total of four of these great birds – two males and two females, with another singleton seen from the vehicle shortly afterwards. Both males showed plumage characteristics of the more southerly 'White-spotted' form, *cyanecula*.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Small numbers seen daily with some fine adult males noted in many of the small villages of the region.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

Widespread with one or two noted on three dates, either on rocky outcrops or in small towns. One at Pena Falcon was feeding avidly on wild olives.

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Very common and seen daily in good numbers on roadside fences, wires and bushes.

Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura*

A detour on the way to the airport provided us with a nice male that sat and posed for prolonged 'scope views on 30th and made for a fitting end to our wonderful week.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

In the Sierra de Guadalupe, a flash of white and a couple of quick calls announced the departure of a bird that was all too close to the little bridge we crossed and was never going to stay...

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Wonderfully common around towns, villages and out in the wider countryside. A much maligned bird but in serious decline throughout much of its natural range.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Plentiful and most often seen in wheeling flocks on the grasslands or *dehesa*. Some good close views at times of this very smart bird.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

A total of around 15 birds were noted skitting around us at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

Pretty much eluded us this time with flight calls heard on a couple of occasions around the rice fields, but we didn't get a look at them.

Red Avadavat *Amandava amandava*

Common with manic balls of energy seen bouncing around the rice fields on 27th and 28th. We did eventually manage to get 'scope views and see the dark face masks and red rump of winter-plumaged birds.

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*

After a bit of a search and some technical manoeuvring with the vehicles, we eventually pinned down an active flock of 11 birds in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th which gave us great 'scope views.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

We had great views of one of these understated little birds at Finca Moheda Alta on 28th and others were heard calling in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

One to two noted on four dates, mostly along rivers or streams.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Very common with some sizeable gatherings, both in open grassland and at wetlands.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Common in open areas and noted throughout the area each day. If flushed carefully, individuals readily sit on fence wires for good views.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Small numbers heard regularly around the rice fields and often difficult to pin down, but one or two were eventually 'scoped, and some of us had a close roadside bird perched on a wire.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Widespread in small numbers and generally less common than most of the other finch species, but small gatherings around Monfrague National Park did give us a chance to enjoy them.

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

The little manic one! The crazy fast song of this species was heard on a daily basis, especially around the hotel, and small flocks were also noted at a number of locations.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Small numbers heard or seen daily.

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus*

Ten or so were noted at Monfrague on 26th and a small group was enjoyed through the 'scopes as they fed on alder seeds in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Plentiful, with busy parties of birds noted throughout the region on a daily basis.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Plentiful on the grasslands and noted on most days.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Some great views of this species around Monfrague, with small parties present at several of our stops, allowing for great 'scope views.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

An abundant species throughout the open grassland habitats and noted in good numbers daily.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

All too brief, one appeared beside the first vehicle in the rice fields on 27th.

Mammals**Red Deer *Cervus elaphus***

Several noted around Monfrague on 26th and a couple in the Sierra de Guadalupe on 29th. These southern animals are generally slighter in build than the larger animals typically found in the UK.

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Small numbers on three dates.

Iberian Hare *Lepus granatensis*

Great views of two near the Sierra Brava reservoir on 28th. A larger animal with proportionately larger ears than Brown Hares (*Lepus europaeus*). They are also more strongly marked on the ears and whiter below.

European Otter *Lutra lutra*

Great views of one mooching around on the riverbank at Pena Falcon on 26th.

Reptiles**Spanish Pond Terrapin *Mauremys leprosa***

Several noted basking on rocks along the Rio Magasca during our picnic lunch on 25th.

Amphibians**Iberian Marsh Frog *Pelophylax perezi***

One dead on the road in Monfrague in the morning was sadly still dead when we went back in the afternoon (!)

Butterflies

Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*), Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocias*) and Bath White (*Pontia daplidice*) were all noted on 25th, with Painted Lady also at Madrid on 24th and a handful of bath Whites noted on 26th and 29th. Not a bad haul for January!

Moths

No doubt John and Mike will eventually work out the handful that came to the hotel lights, but we all enjoyed a Hummingbird Hawkmoth (*Macroglossum stellatarum*) that fed at our feet on 25th. On a daily basis we also noted an abundance of the larvae of the Winter Webworm (*Ocnogyna baetica*) scattered across the ground and offering great feeding opportunities for any Great Spotted Cuckoo that might decide to make an early return to the area.

Dragonflies

A single Vagrant Emperor (*Hemianax ephippiger*) was noted at Saucedilla by John and Fernando on 24th.

Flora

Any time of year there's always an amazing array of flora to be enjoyed and the trip report could be doubled in length to accommodate all the plant species seen. But we'll keep it short and just note, for the record, the species that I know people photographed and asked about. These included the tiny daffodils at Monfrague, which were *Narcissus triandrus pallidulus* and the white pea flowers along the roadside in Monfrague, which were *Astragalus lusitanicus*.