

TOUR LEADERS: ASHLEY SAUNDERS & PAUL ROBERTS

PARTICIPANTS: ALAN BAKER & JENNY WILLIAMS, IAN GRANT, DAVID TOMALIN, ANDREW SISSON, MIKE & JANE STEVENS

WEATHER: A COOL 10C WHEN WE ARRIVED IN MADRID ON 22ND, WITH VERY HEAVY RAIN MOVING THROUGH ON THE JOURNEY SOUTH. OTHERWISE VERY WARM AND DRY WITH TEMPERATURES TOPPING 30C.

TOTAL SPECIES: LEADER COUNT OF 122 SPECIES INCLUDED 3 HEARD ONLY.

RAREST BIRD: GREAT WHITE EGRET IS DESCRIBED AS A RARE WINTER VISITOR, AT OTHER TIMES OF YEAR IT IS A VAGRANT. BEARDED TIT IS ALSO A VAGRANT THOUGH NOT REQUIRING A DESCRIPTION FROM THE SPANISH RARITIES COMMITTEE!

General

The week was very enjoyable with an excellent group that got on very well, and some excellent birding. Our hotel, Viña las Torres about 10km south-east of Trujillo on the Ex-208 Guadalupe road, was a real gem and we enjoyed fabulous hospitality and excellent food with local produce, wine and acorn liqueur! The garden birding here was quite tremendous and meant that some days we felt we hardly needed to leave! It made for some excellent early morning and late evening walking opportunities.

22nd April Oropesa and Viña las Torres

4.30pm Oropesa: Leaving the NV motorway and heading north towards the Gredos Mountains, we stopped for lunch on the road running from the village of Oropesa north towards the Embalse de Navalcan. Raptors were already a major feature, setting the scene for the rest of the week and we saw numerous Black and Red Kites, 8+ Griffon and 2 Black Vultures, Lesser Kestrel and Short-toed Eagle, with Booted Eagle having already been seen from the motorway. Bee-eaters were seen along the roadside here and a Quail calling in the fields was the first of many encountered during the week. Lesser Kestrel and Crested Lark were other typical birds seen here, and a Short-toed Lark was also delivering its song flight from high above.

6pm Viña las Torres: Whilst unloading the minibus some of the group had a superb male Blue Rock Thrush, which I missed and it turned out to be the only one seen in the 'garden'! We familiarised ourselves with the local birds such as Serin, Hoopoe, Bee-eater, Azure-winged Magpie, Nightingale, Sardinian Warbler, Red-rumped Swallow and Stonechat. Two Southern Grey Shrikes were seen on our evening walk and a Scops Owl was heard calling. Evenings were the best time to enjoy the Nightingales, when other birds had gone quiet and several birds could be heard around the grounds.

23rd April Santa Marta Loop

7.30am Viña las Torres: Early morning walk produced Sardinian Warbler, 2 Hoopoe, Woodchat Shrike, Woodlark, 2 Red-rumped Swallows, Nightingale, and a fly past Great-spotted Cuckoo which was unfortunately only seen by some of us. 9am Trujillo: A brief stop in the town gave us the opportunity to observe the breeding Lesser Kestrels and White Storks, while scrutiny of the large numbers of Common Swifts revealed several Pallid Swifts and gave the group chance to get to grips with ID of this difficult British vagrant.

10am Santa Marta Loop: We drove the southern half of the loop from the N521 Cáceres Road up to Santa Marta de Magasca and north as far as the Rio Magasca crossing. Birding from the first left hand bend and looking north across the steppe produced our first Little Bustards, including a cracking fly past from a displaying male and attendant female. Two male Montagu's Harriers drifted across in front of us giving fantastic views, and a Roller was displaying in the distance but unfortunately only seen by Ashley.

One km further on, we took the track off to the right which runs across some very good quality steppe. We soon located Great Bustard, and we saw four different birds here including a magnificent male with tail fanned striding along the horizon. A Hobby dashing by whilst having lunch was our only one of the trip, whilst other raptors included large numbers of Griffon Vultures, 4 Black Vultures, 2 Booted Eagles and another Montagu's Harrier. 10 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew over calling while a stony cultivated field yielded a smart male Black-eared Wheatear, accompanied by a male Northern Wheatear for comparison. A Tawny Pipit soon appeared in the same field and while watching this bird feeding along the field edge, Paul called out to alert us of 6 Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying over! Paul also did very well to pick out a pair of Stone Curlew on the hill which although distant were the only ones seen on the trip. Calandra Lark, Quail, Zitting Cisticola, 2 Short-toed Lark and 3 Gadwall were also noted.

24th April Parc Natural de Monfragüe

9.30am Rio Almonte: This beautiful spot along the Trujillo—Torrejon road was well worth a stop with Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow and 2 Pallid Swifts showing an interest in the bridge and our first Common Kestrel of the trip. Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle and Kingfisher were also seen.

10am Arroyo de la Vid: A very pleasant spot on the approach into Monfragüe produced few birds though we did see Black Vulture, Woodchat Shrike and Bee-eater.

10.30am Castillo de Monfragüe: This fantastic panoramic viewpoint provided some great views of the regions Vultures with both Black and Griffon drifting past at close range, almost eye level at times. A Black Stork was watched circling over the Tajo and a Peregrine was seen circling above the Pena Falcon opposite. Rock Bunting was a new trip bird, singing in the open on the walk up to the castle, while an Alpine Swift drifting over was also a first. Down on the lake shore, a smart Egyptian Vulture could be seen wrestling with a dead fish, joined now and again by scavenging Black Kites. It is the views from the top though that takes the breath away, with the vast cork oak woodland or 'dehesa' as it is known stretching away to the south as far as the eye can see. Below the castle, 2 Chough was a good trip tick and we also had a brief female Black Redstart and a male Blue Rock Thrush on the crags.

12.30pm Pena Falcon: Stopping for lunch beneath the towering crags, we watched the Vultures going about their business and had superb views of up to three different Black Storks on the ledges opposite including one bird on a nest. A pair of Blue Rock Thrush were feeding below us while the crags behind produced a smart male Black Redstart and nice views of a perched Short-toed Eagle.

2pm Tajo Bridge: This bridge was worth stopping at just to observe its vast colony of House Martins, which nest side by side and one above the other on both sides of the bridges 1/2 mile length, producing a swarm of birds quite unlike anything ever seen in the UK! It was the Alpine Swifts which share the bridge that stole the show, and we had some excellent views of these enigmatic birds reaching huge speeds in the air overhead.

2.45pm Mirador de la Bascula: The raptor watch point here was quite disappointing, being the best place in the park for viewings its raptors. We did have a pair of Egyptian Vultures here and Paul managed to glimpse the Subalpine Warbler that could be heard calling, though a tip-off from some British birders about an Eagle Owl chick at Tietar Cliff saw us bundling into the minibus and heading off in that direction!

3.30pm Tietar Cliff: One of the most magical events of the trip unfolded as we arrived at Tietar to be greeted by a pair of circling Spanish Imperial Eagles, one bird dropping into the nest where it sat for the whole duration of our stay here. These were fantastic views of such a rare and spectacular bird, the only endemic bird of the trip. Male Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Long-tailed Tit and Booted Eagle were seen but no sign of the Owl until 'hawk-eye Baker' claimed to be watching the bird! Scopes were quickly trained on the spot and sure enough a rather large, fiery-eyed Eagle Owl chick was observed glaring out from under a broom bush, panting heavily in the hot sun—what a bird and well done Alan for spotting this one!

6pm Viña las Torres: Whilst drinking our beer out on the veranda, we had no fewer than 3 Short-toed Eagles drift over with a dark-phase Booted Eagle, and a Pallid Swift amongst a movement of Commons overhead. 4 Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike and Nightingale.

25th April Santa Marta Loop West

7.45am Viña las Torres: The best bird of the pre-breakfast walk was undoubtedly the male Hawfinch which flew out of the dehesa to feed under the wall outside the front gate! Excellent views were had by those present though unfortunately not everyone saw the bird.

9.30am western end of Santa Marta Loop: Turning north-east off the N521 Caceres road, we had a relatively close female Great Bustard and 4 Montagu's Harriers by the roadside. Further along, stopping at the top of the valley we noted Little Owl and Red-legged Partridge, and our first Thekla Lark which showed well on the track behind.

12noon Rio Almonte: Just north of Santa Marta de Magasca, the road winds down to the Rio Almonte and we stopped under the bridge to admire the smart male Spanish Sparrows nest building under the rafters. Egyptian Vulture, Bee-eater, female Sardinian Warbler and 2 Common Sandpipers were also seen, while our walk west along the river was very successful. Ashley spotted a cracking Black Wheatear on a bush at the top of the ridge, and the bird soon flew right down into the river bed in front of us where it proceeded to chase a male Blue Rock Thrush! David also had good views of a Cirl Bunting here, a species which so far had managed to elude most of the group.

2pm Monroy: Stopping in the village centre for a coffee, we took the opportunity to watch the White Storks and Lesser Kestrels and get some photos.

3pm Rio Almonte: We crossed the river again North of Caceres, and just as we were pulling up Ashley spotted a pair of Golden Eagles circling above the valley. Bailing out of the bus we all enjoyed these birds soaring above the ridge, one bird dropping down to perch on a rock and show its stunning golden head. One of the pair was a sub adult bird with white wing flashes and this bird came up again to circle with the first bird. Wandering down to the bridge where numerous Crag Martins were nesting, we had some great views of Alpine Swifts whizzing past at close range, and while photographing a plant by the path, a male Subalpine Warbler perched in front of Paul! A second male joined it and we had cracking views of these tiny Sylvia's in a hawthorn just feet away.

4.30pm just North of Caceres: The telegraph poles along the road out of Caceres and their nest boxes are particularly attractive to Roller, and we had 3 of these fantastic birds on the wires by the road.

26th April The South

9.30am Madrigalejo: The rice fields around this village to the south of Trujillo when wet provide a magnet for passing waders. We stopped by a pool surrounded by Eucalyptus Trees and discovered a colony of about 5 pairs of Little Ringed Plovers, these smart little waders being a scarce breeder in the UK. A gathering of 5 Black-winged Stilts were accompanied by 5 Greenshanks and a Great Reed Warbler was heard croaking from the reeds. Cetti's and Sardinian Warblers showed well in the surrounding vegetation where 20+ of the introduced Common Waxbill provided an interesting addition to the list. A small group of Spanish Yellow Wagtails were seen by some of the group, while the Bee-eater colony in the sand bank was enjoyed by all. Southern Grey Shrike, Red-rumped Swallow, Sand Martin, Little Egret and Common Sandpiper were also seen, while, the Great Reed Warbler showed well giving scope views to most of the group.

12.30pm Rio Zujar: This idyllic spot provided an ideal break for lunch and it wasn't long before we had seen Purple Heron, with at least three birds present. Night Heron and Little Bittern were glimpsed by some while other birds on the river included Green and 4 Common Sandpipers, Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Shoveler and Greylag Goose. A Willow Warbler in the shallows was the only one of the trip. Great Reed, Eurasian Reed and Cetti's Warblers and Nightingale provided a constant background chorus here. After lunch, we took a walk along the river to view some of the reed bed areas, and soon located a foraging party of 3 juvenile Penduline Tits. The birds gave fantastic views at close range and were scoped by all feeding on the bulrush heads.

3pm La Serena: The vast plains to the south are worth visiting just to take in the vistas and listen to the cacophony of lark song. 3 Great Bustards were seen, though very distant, while Calandra & Short-toed Larks, Montagu's Harrier and Black Vulture were also noted.

27th April Almaraz, Casas de Miravete, Trujillo and Belen

9.45am Embalse de Arrocampo Almaraz: This superb wetland site did not fail us and we enjoyed a fantastic and bird-filled morning here. Almost immediately we saw Little Bittern and during the course of the morning we must have seen around 10 birds. 3+ Purple Swamp Hens were present, and we had very good views of one balancing precariously in the tops of the reeds. 2 Great Reed Warblers included one very showy bird which we were all able to see well, while Cetti's Warblers were common—Savi's Warbler was not, however, and only heard briefly. An adult Penduline Tit performed beautifully collecting nesting material from the bulrush heads in front of us, though a Bearded Tit which flew across the road proved much rarer, as it is only recorded as a vagrant in the region! 7 Night Herons were seen distantly in flight and 2 Purple Herons were also present, though again we found ourselves a rarity in the form of a Great White Egret which flew across the reservoir, a bird normally only recorded in winter here and a vagrant in other seasons. 2 distant Gull-billed Terns were the only ones of the trip.

12.30pm Casas de Miravete: Following the winding road up and over the ridge, we stopped at the highest point to check the pine forest and Mediterranean scrub while having lunch. Cirl Bunting could be heard singing here, but again proved elusive, though up to 3 male Subalpine Warblers gave fantastic and prolonged views in the surrounding scrub. A Melodious Warbler was also singing further down the track but only seen by some. Booted & Short-toed Eagle and Black Vulture circling together was very good, while Woodlark song was a continuous backdrop here—best bird would have been the Short-toed Treecreeper seen briefly by some though unfortunately it disappeared back into the trees.

2pm Viña las Torres: Stopping back at the hotel we were very fortunate to have the Great-spotted Cuckoo which many had missed earlier in the week fly across and perch in a tree where it sat for several minutes being mobbed by Azure-winged Magpies! Well done again Alan for spotting this one!

3pm Trujillo: We took the opportunity to walk up into the old part of the town to the Castillo and enjoy the views down across the plains and back towards our hotel. The Lesser Kestrels of course provided an added incentive and some lovely views were obtained of the birds nesting in holes in the castle walls. Sardinian Warbler, Serin and Pallid Swift were also seen.

4pm Belen plain: This is a beautiful area of steppe just behind Trujillo and offers a chance to see the characteristic steppe species which this afternoon included Great Bustard, with distant views of a male, and Little Bustard heard calling only. Calandra Lark, Montagu's Harrier and Black Vulture were also noted here, as well as a fantastic spread of flora.

8.15pm north-east of Monroy: The journey back to the Black-winged Kite site produced 5 Montagu's Harriers over the road together and 2 Great-spotted Cuckoos on a roadside fence, with Great Bustard glimpsed by some. At the site, more views were obtained of Great-spotted Cuckoo and we also saw Southern Grey Shrike, Bee-eater, and 14 Black Kites coming in to roost but unfortunately no sign of the target bird. Quail was also heard calling here.

FLORAL SUMMARY

One of the abiding floral memories of the trip was the sheer abundance of Purple Viper's Bugloss *Echium plantagineum*, carpeting whole fields and seemingly adorning every roadside.

Another very common purple flower was French Lavender *Lavandula stoechas* subsp. *pedunculata*, often present in scrubby habitat. Some other frequently seen shrubs were the 'Sun Roses', especially Gum Cistus *Cistus ladanifer* (white flowers with purple blotch), Spanish Heath *Erica australis*, various yellow flowered *Genistas* (as well as the related Spiny Broom *Calicotome* sp.) and White Spanish Broom *Cytisus multiflorus*.

A couple of stately plants seen in scrubby hillsides were the bulbous White Ashpodel *Asphodelus albus* and the umbellifer *Thapsia villosa* (this is the large plant Paul was admiring when an obliging Subalpine Warbler made our acquaintance). The diminutive but attractive Spotted Rockrose *Tuberia guttata* (yellow flowers with a striking purple-brown central blotch) was also present in this habitat.

Some introduced plants also evident in scrub and woods were Century Plant *Agave Americana*, Prickly Pear *Opuntia ficus-indica*, and several *Eucalyptus* sp.

Roadside weeds put on a good show everywhere, notably Poppies and Field Marigolds. Other typical components were Fumitories *Fumaria* sp. (this is a major food item for Turtle Doves), Common Mallow *Malva sylvestris*, Tassel Hyacinth *Muscari comosum*, as well as various not specifically identified members of the Caryophyllaceae, Leguminosae, Labiatae, Compositae, Geraniaceae families, not to mention many others.

Water Crowfoot *Ranunculus* sp. was seen in profusion in most of the rivers and streams. The endemic foxglove *Digitalis thapsi* was growing on rocks at Monfragüe. Orchids included Champagne Orchid *Orchis champagneuxii* (closely related to our own Green-winged Orchid *Orchis morio*), seen in profusion in and around the hotel grounds and Tongue Orchid *Serapias lingua*, in damp ground near Monroy.

Other non avian items of interest were the water-loving Viperine Snake *Natrix maura* and the huge moth seen outside the hotel one morning, later identified as a Giant Peacock *Saturnia pyri* (like an oversize version of our native Emperor Moth *Saturnia pavonia*).