

EXTREMADURA

19TH – 25TH APRIL 2008
TOUR REPORT



CELTIC BIRD TOURS
&
ORIOLE
ADVENTURES

LEADERS: ASHLEY SAUNDERS & PAUL ROBERTS

PARTICIPANTS: MARGARET COOK, WENDY DAVIES, CAROLE TAYLOR, JAN & KATHY HAECK AND PAUL MARSHMAN

WEATHER: A COOL 8C WHEN WE ARRIVED IN MADRID ON 19TH, WITH HEAVY RAIN MOVING THROUGH ON THE JOURNEY SOUTH. THESE UNSETTLED CONDITIONS PREVAILED FOR THE FIRST TWO DAYS WITH TEMPERATURES STRUGGLING TO GET ABOVE 8C AND FREQUENT HEAVY DOWNPOURS AND THUNDER. TOWARDS THE END OF THE TOUR HOWEVER, A COMPLETE CONTRAST WITH 28C AND CLOUDLESS SKIES.

TOTAL SPECIES: GROUP COUNT OF 129 SPECIES INCLUDED 6 HEARD ONLY.

General

The week was very enjoyable with an excellent group, and some really tremendous birding. Our hotel, Vina 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 very productive and our morning walks produced a good range of species.

Saturday 19th April Madrid to Viña las Torres

Arriving in Madrid at about 16.30 we set out along the NV motorway in the direction of Trujillo some 240km away. Our birding from the car as we drove south-west was surprisingly productive once we had cleared the city and headed across the open countryside of Castilla La Mancha. Black Kites soon set the scene for the coming days and other raptors included Red Kite, Common and Lesser Kestrels, Booted Eagle and a close Black Vulture. White Stork, Cattle Egret and Black-winged Stilt were noted around the various roadside pools created by the downpours, and Crested Larks and Corn Buntings were ubiquitous as ever. Paul and Ashley had a Great-spotted Cuckoo fly over the road and other species noted included Southern Grey Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie, Hoopoe, Common Swift, European Serin and European Bee-eater. An early night was had by all following a long days travelling...

Sunday 20th April Santa Marta Loop

Fresh southerlies and heavy downpours of sleet and rain were a feature of our birding today! Our pre-breakfast amble provided our first taste of the local birdlife and particularly good views of Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrike were enjoyed. Sardinian Warbler, Eurasian Stonechat, Blue and Great Tits, Azure-winged Magpie, European Serin and Hoopoe were seen, with Common Cuckoo, Golden Oriole and Eurasian Scops Owl heard only. The best bird was our only Eurasian Hobby of the trip, which dashed by at close range. Heading out to Trujillo and then towards Caceres, we picked up the minor road towards Santa Marta de Magasca – the famous 'santa marta loop'. Our first stop by the bend in the road almost immediately produced Little Bustard, with three males seen in surrounding fields. Fifty Cattle Egrets were present and a Southern Grey Shrike stopped on the fence in front of us. A flock of Spanish Sparrows were in the tamarisks and the open steppe ahead resounded to the song of Calandra Lark. A cry of 'Bustards!' yielded our first Greats of the trip with nine of these enormous birds flying along the top of the ridge. While scanning for these, six Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were spotted and we had clear if distant views of these elusive birds. Moving further along the loop we headed down [the now rather muddy!] track across some very good quality steppe. Stopping to scan a recently ploughed field our first Northern Wheatear presented itself and two Greater Short-toed Larks gave good views. A Thekla Lark was less confiding though our attention was soon turned from the ground to the sky as the first raptors of the morning began to appear. A male Montagu's Harrier ghosted by and Red and Black Kites, Common Buzzard, Griffon and Black Vultures, Booted and Short-toed Eagles each circled into view in succession! While notching up Gadwall, Common Sandpiper and two Black-winged Stilt on the pond, three large raptors circling above the steppe beyond turned out to be majestic Golden Eagles, a real bonus so early on in the tour. Two flocks of calling Sandgrouse we seen here but unfortunately both were distant and none settled, 15+ Pin-tailed and 10+ Black-bellied were noted. Six Great Bustards included one bird which flew over us at quite close range, allowing us to appreciate the bulk of these amazing birds. Back to the road and further on towards Santa Marta, we stopped by the road to admire a cereal field and it's Montagu's Harriers. At least eight birds were present, and the males were observed performing their incredible 'loop the loop' sky dance to the watching females. Lesser Kestrel and European Bee-eater were also seen. The picturesque Rio Magasca crossing was our next stop and we enjoyed lunch by the river, allowing us to catch up with Common Kingfisher, Grey and White Wagtails and the breeding Crag Martins. House Martin, Common Swift, thirty Griffon Vulture, Black Vulture and good views of a Booted Eagle were also highlights. The European Serin outnumbered our first Chaffinch, and a Common Sandpiper flew downstream. Our next river crossing was the Almonte, and after two attempts to get out of the minibus were curtailed by heavy downpours, we finally made it out and along the river bank. Two Black Wheatear were seen along the boulder strewn river bed, though unfortunately these were a little distant. Three Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Cirl Bunting, Red-rumped Swallow, Crag Martin, Grey Wagtail and Greenfinch were all noted while watching the wheatears. Our final stop today was on the Torrejon road north of Monroy, by the stand of Stone Pines with their White Stork nests. We wandered down the track to the mix of olive groves, grassland and cereal fields in the shallow valley bottom, and soon spotted a distant Black-winged Kite hovering over the dehesa to the east. Attempts to relocate the bird were unsuccessful, and we wandered further on. Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrike were then noted as well as calling Common Quail. Back at the minibus for a welcome drink and piece of Belen's cake, a distant grey blob on the telegraph wire required a cursory glance – Black-winged Kite! We rushed back down the path and this time the bird put on a show, and we enjoyed fantastic views of it perched on the wires, atop bushes, and hunting elegantly over the fields. A magical end to our first days birding in Extremadura...

Monday 21st April The South

Our morning walk produced little in the cool conditions though Grey Heron and Common Cuckoo were trip ticks, the first Common Nightingale was heard and fifteen Yellow-legged Gulls flying over were a bit of a surprise. Heading south after breakfast to Madrigalejo we spent the morning exploring the rice fields and surrounds. On getting out of the minibus two European Rollers were spotted on the wires and we spent the next few minutes watching these fantastic birds. The large pool by the eucalyptus stand produced four Little Ringed Plovers and a Little Egret, while the small reed bed resounded to the croaking of a Great Reed Warbler, which gave excellent views.

At least fifty Common Waxbills were in the area and six Black-winged Stilts, Southern Grey Shrike, European Serin, Common Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, two Black-headed Gulls and Red-rumped Swallow were also noted. A second Great Reed Warbler gave even better views than the first, and a Reed Warbler was also singing. Further along the track, two flooded paddies proved attractive to a flock of Gull-billed Terns with at least ten present, and it was while watching these that a superb adult summer plumaged Whiskered Tern floated in and began hawking over the water with the Gull-bills. As ever in Extremadura, one cannot afford to forget to look skyward, and on doing this a superb Short-toed Eagle drifted directly overhead. Booted Eagle and Red Kite were then noted in quick succession but a Honey Buzzard which drifted north was a definite highlight. A pause by another series of rice paddies at nearby Vegas Altas produced a single flock of twenty five Gull-billed Terns and a perched male Lesser Kestrel. A little further south, we enjoyed our lunch by the Rio Zujar and our first Sand Martins were seen with fifty present. At least three Marsh Harriers were circling the reed bed and two Purple Herons flew up river. Reed Warbler and Penduline Tit were both heard only and a Golden Oriole was glimpsed. Bizarrely the Common Nightingale which we observed singing in the open was the only one seen on the trip, and hopefully the almost total lack of this species during the tour was due to a late arrival in the region rather than a reflection of population levels. Booted and Short-toed Eagles, six European Bee-eater, six Grey Heron, two Common Raven and Cetti's Warbler were also noted. The vast plains of La Serena were our final destination today, and this area is worth visiting just for the views across the steppe towards the sierras in the south. We did see birds of course, just in case the views weren't enough! Stopping by the first pond the speciality of the area gave itself up rather easily, with five Collared Pratincoles hawking tern like over the water. Superb views were had of these brilliant birds, and a calling Stone Curlew betrayed its presence in the field behind allowing us to obtain reasonable scope views. Other birds noted included Spanish Sparrow, one Little Bustard, Calandra Lark, Hoopoe, forty Goldfinch, Common Cuckoo, five Griffon Vultures, Woodchat Shrike, five Montagu's Harriers and a Marsh Harrier. A real highlight, however, were the good views we had of displaying Great Bustards in a roadside field. Thinking our day was done, we headed north for Trujillo, though three roadside Great-spotted Cuckoos gave tremendous views down to a few feet from the car window on the way!

Tuesday 22nd April Almaraz Marsh, Casas de Miravete, Arroyo de la Vid, Rio Almonte

A superb days birding today in warmer conditions started with our usual pre-breakfast amble from the hotel. At least six Woodchat and single Southern Grey Shrike were noted this morning, along with two European Bee-eater, two Common Cuckoo, Red-rumped Swallow, Red-legged Partridge and Sardinian Warbler. Unfortunately the Hawfinch that flew over was only seen by Paul and Ashley. Our first stop this morning was the very windy causeway at Embalse de Arrocampo Almaraz by the nuclear power station. This superb piece of wetland did not disappoint and we were soon watching singing Savi's Warbler with at least four present. Two Purple Heron gave views both in flight and on the ground, and three Purple Swamp Hen were seen; an adult and two large chicks. Warblers were well represented with the Savi's supplemented by Reed and Great Reed, Sedge and Cetti's, and the waters of the reservoir itself yielded Common Coot, Great Crested Grebe and two Gull-billed Terns. As always, an eye to the sky produced our first good views of Pallid Swift, quickly followed by a superb low level Egyptian Vulture. Little Bittern was the next species to make its way onto our list with a smart male climbing among the reeds joined by a female and then a second first-summer male. We watched these acrobatic little birds catching frogs at the base of the reeds for quite some time, and the two males even indulged in a little friendly fighting! Short-toed Eagle, Marsh Harrier, Zitting Cisticola and ten European Bee-eater completed the scene here. Following our coffee break by the new 'visitor centre' at the reserve entrance, we checked out the reed-fringed pool there with another Little Bittern and Purple Swamp Hen noted. We headed up into the hills nearby for lunch at the beautiful Casas de Miravete, a site which is actually higher than Snowdon even though it doesn't feel like it! For the first time we felt the warmth of the sun on our backs as we had our lunch, and the first Great-spotted Woodpecker and Subalpine Warbler were noted while we ate. After lunch, we all obtained stunning views of the Subalpine, and a short walk through the pines yielded equally good views of Crested Tit. Two Short-toed Treecreeper were less obliging, however. Griffon Vulture, Long-tailed Tit and Common Raven were also seen here, along with a beautiful Spanish Festoon butterfly. Our next stop proved to be something of a trip highlight, as we headed down to the Arroyo de la Vid and surrounding cistus scrub habitat. The habitat looked superb for *sylvia* warblers, and a short distance from the car we located our first Spectacled Warbler. The following half an hour was unforgettable as we had three male Spectacled singing, song flighting and perching up all around us allowing for some excellent photographic opportunities. The many Dartford Warblers present tried to attract our attention, and in the end we had to admit that they too were worth a look! Thinking our luck would soon run out we tried a site for Orphean Warbler and had no joy, but trying a second time nearby was more successful and two of these large *sylvias* gave really good views in a Holm Oak right by the path. A Black Vulture and flock of fourteen European Bee-eaters completed the scene. Finally, we stopped of on the way back at the beautiful Rio Almonte crossing on the Torrejon road, and enjoyed particularly good views of Spanish Sparrow, Crag Martin, Red Kite, White Wagtail and Short-toed Eagle.

Wednesday 23rd April Monfragüe National Park

A productive walk this morning produced the Hawfinch again, but once more only seen by Paul and Ashley! A Golden Oriole was singing but not seen, though we did see Great-spotted Cuckoo, two Woodchat Shrike, eight European Bee-eater, Sardinian Warbler and Red-rumped Swallow. The most significant sighting of the morning, however, was a stonking dark morph male Montagu's Harrier, all black with white wing flashes, a 'new bird' for all present. We headed into the stunning Monfragüe National Park today and our first stop was the Castillo de Monfragüe atop the mountain ridge at the junction of the main reservoirs. It was warm already when we arrived and Paul's excellent manoeuvring of the minibus saved us the long hot slog from the bottom car park! A Rock Bunting was singing on the walk up to the Castillo and both Winter Wren and European Robin were heard here. From the top, excellent views of the Pena Falcon rock opposite allowed close views of the Griffon Vultures, and we also saw Egyptian Vulture, two Red-billed Chough, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and our first Alpine Swifts. A superb Black Stork circled overhead, and from the top of the castle walls we were able to take in the breathtaking sight of the rolling dehesa stretching all the way out to Trujillo and Caceres to the south. Returning to the minibus, we came across hirundines collecting mud from a puddle on the path and took up a position that allowed us to photograph the birds. Red-rumped Swallows, House Martins and Crag Martins were dropping down just feet away from us giving stunning views, and some good pictures! Back at the bus, a Short-toed Treecreeper was singing, and walking down to the cave entrance proved a good idea despite appearance of a very large party of seemingly every school child in Extremadura! The birds seemed oblivious to the noise and a male Blue Rock Thrush gave excellent views.

Two small brown passerines then flew in to a tree in the cave entrance and a quick reaction with the scopes revealed a pair of Rock Sparrows, which then spent the next few minutes giving us brilliant views, and a very useful addition to our list! We then moved down to the car park below the Pena Falcon where we enjoyed lunch in the company of circling Griffon and Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagles and three Black Storks. A male Cirl Bunting singing below us gave very nice views. Continuing around the park we stopped by the bridge over the Tajo, where a truly spectacular colony of House Martins exists with double stacked nests along both sides of the 1/2km long bridge. The result is a swarm of birds quite unlike anything ever experienced in the UK. A close pass by from an Alpine Swift, and a small flock of Rock Doves were also seen here. Following a brief stop at the village of Villarreal de san Carlos, we continued on to the watch point at Mirador de la Bascula. A hot half hour looking skyward produced so many Black Kites we really were starting to get fed up of this species! Griffon and Black Vultures, five Short-toed Eagles, Booted Eagle and Subalpine Warbler were also seen. So on to our last stop in the park, the beautiful Tietar Cliff, and we were not be disappointed by its birds. Many nesting Griffon Vultures had chicks, and three Black Storks were circling as well as Egyptian Vulture and three more Short-toed Eagles. The mighty Eurasian Eagle Owl chick was eventually located after the painstaking directions of which rock to look at were eventually fathomed, and the fluffy giant even raised his growing ear tufts at us as he had a stretch and quick look around. This was to be surpassed, however, when the adult bird was located sitting in a crevice nearby, what a stunning bird! So what did we have left to look for? Well Spanish Imperial Eagle of course, and right on cue an adult of this endemic *aquila* circled into view above the cliff and spent the next ten minutes or so soaring up into the clouds, its snowy white shoulders glinting in the afternoon sunshine. We were very happy, and set off on the long winding road back through the park. Our birding for the day had not finished, however, and as we gathered on the terrace at Viña las Torres with a cold glass of beer the late afternoon movement of raptors off the plains began overhead. In about half an hour we saw ten Griffon Vultures, one Black Vulture, two Lesser Kestrels, two Montagu's Harriers, one Short-toed Eagle, one Red Kite, numerous Black Kites and an absolutely superb Golden Eagle which circled right over the hotel at low level. A large movement of swifts then followed with some of our best views of Pallid in the good light conditions.

Thursday 24th April Belen, Trujillo & Santa Marta Loop

We were out before breakfast this morning to experience sun rise on the beautiful Belen plain just east of Trujillo. What a fantastic site this is and we had to apologise profusely to our hosts for being half an hour late for breakfast as the birds just kept on coming! Bustards were well represented, with nine Little and ten Great, the latter giving absolutely stunning views as they indulged in full 'foam bath' display by the roadside – what a sight! Calandra Larks were just everywhere, and we had some very close views, while a Greater Short-toed Lark on the road gave another opportunity to study this subtle species. Red Kite, Raven, Black Vulture, Hoopoe, three Little Egrets, Northern Wheatear, Common Whitethroat and Lesser Kestrel were also seen, while three Stone Curlews gave really good views, two often being in the same scope view as a Little Bustard! After our belated breakfast, we headed into Trujillo for a coffee in the Plaza Major and a look at the beautiful old part of the town, home of the conquistadors, but now home to many White Storks, Common and Pallid Swifts and Lesser Kestrels! Egyptian and Black Vultures were also seen. Returning to the delightful Santa Marta Loop, we revisited some of the areas from earlier in the week, and in the hot sun raptors were more in evidence. Three Short-toed Eagles, two Black Vultures, two Red Kites, ten Montagu's Harriers [sky dancing males again!] and 120+ Griffon Vultures [the largest kettle we had seen so far] were all in the area. Other species noted around the loop were Greater Short-toed and Calandra Larks, Little and Great Bustard, two Northern Wheatear, European Bee-eater and Gadwall. Our best bird, however, was the Thekla Lark which gave us really excellent views and a useful comparison with the similar Crested Lark. Our final stop today was the tranquil Rio Almonte, revisited in somewhat better conditions than previously! A singing male Black Wheatear gave really nice prolonged views this time and we also noted two Little Ringed Plovers, Grey Wagtail, two White Wagtail, Blue Rock Thrush, Montagu's Harrier and Cirl Bunting. Finally at Viña las Torres this evening three Eurasian Scops Owls were calling and a pair of Crag Martins were prospecting the tower.

Friday 25th April Almaraz Marsh and Viña las Torres

Our final morning at Hotel Rural Viña las Torres before the journey north to Madrid. Nine European Bee-eaters on the wires outside was a lovely sight and the Hawfinch was seen again. Paul located a Sardinian Warbler nest with chicks before breakfast. Saying our farewells to our welcoming hosts Juan Pedro and Belen, we set off to Almaraz marsh for a final hour of birding before starting our journey up the motorway. Little Bittern, two Purple Heron, two Gull-billed Tern, Savi's Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Bearded Tit, European Bee-eater and Gadwall were noted. In nearby Saucedilla village, we took a final opportunity to photograph the Lesser Kestrels nesting in the old church and obtained our best views yet of this elegant raptor.

Floral Summary

Probably the most memorable floral sights of the trip were the swathes of French Lavender *Lavandula stoechas* subspecies *Pedunculata* and Purple Viper's Bugloss *Echium plantagineum*, carpeting whole fields and seemingly adorning every roadside.

Frequently seen shrubs included 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 stately plant of scrubby hillsides was the bulbous White Ashpodel *Asphodelus albus*. The diminutive but attractive Spotted Rockrose *Tuberia guttata* [yellow flowers with a striking purple-brown central blotch] was also present in this habitat, most notably at Casas De Miravete.

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 Corn Poppies *Papaver rhoeas* and Corn Marigolds *Chrysanthemum segetum*. Other typical components were Fumitories *Fumaria* sp., 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.

The endemic foxglove *Digitalis thapsi* was growing on rocks at Monfragüe. Orchids were represented by 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*, common in damp ground north of Monroy [at the Black-shouldered Kite site].

Another non avian item of interest was the huge moth seen outside the hotel, identified as a Giant Peacock *Saturnia pyri* [like an oversize version of our native Emperor Moth *Saturnia pavonia*]. Butterflies noted included the lovely Spanish Festoon *Zerynthia rumina* [seen at Casas De Miravete and Arroyo de la Vid], Bath White *Pontia daplidice*, Morocco Orange Tip *Anthocharis belia*, Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*, Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas*, Black-eyed Blue *Glaucopsyche melanops*, Brown Argus *Aricia agestis*, Large Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis polychloros*, Spanish Marbled White *Melanargia ines* and Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*.

Systematic List

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Great Cormorant
Little Bittern
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Mallard
Gadwall
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Golden Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Black Kite
Red Kite
Black-winged Kite
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Honey Buzzard
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Common Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel
Eurasian Hobby
Red-legged Partridge
Common Quail
Common Moorhen
Common Coot
Purple Swamp-Hen
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Common Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Whiskered Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Common Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Eurasian Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Eurasian Scops Owl [H]
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Eurasian Hoopoe
Common Kingfisher

European Bee-eater
European Roller
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Sky Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Wood Lark
Short-toed Lark
Calandra Lark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
House Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Winter Wren [H]
European Robin [H]
Common Nightingale
Black Redstart
Northern Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Common Blackbird
Blackcap
Orphean Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Common Whitethroat
Spectacled Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sedge Warbler [H]
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler [H]
Great Reed Warbler
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Bearded Tit
Short-toed Treecreeper
Woodchat Shrike
Southern Grey Shrike
Black-billed Magpie
Azure-winged Magpie
Western Jackdaw
Red-billed Chough
Common Raven
Spotless Starling
Golden Oriole [H]
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
European Goldfinch
European Greenfinch
European Serin
Hawfinch
Cirl Bunting
Corn Bunting
Rock Bunting