

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura
11 – 18 April 2009

Leaders: Ian Rowlands & Mark Denman

Guests: Helen & Ken Searstone, Stuart & Christine Bray, Ann Pym, Denise & John Holbrow, Geraldine & Douglas Pilcher, Melanie & Colin Grant and John McAlpine

Our second trip of 2009 was pretty wonderful, with fine sunny weather in the first half of the week and less settled (cold!) conditions in the second half including a memorable hail storm!. Bird highlights were five Black-shouldered Kites whilst other raptors included great views of Spanish Imperial, Golden, Short-toed, Booted and Bonelli's Eagles, plus a flock of over 20 Montagu's Harriers (including 'black' melanistic birds), plus; Eagle Owl with chicks; Great & Little Bustards (including Great Bustards mating); outstanding views of Black-bellied & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse; numerous Bee-eaters; Collared Pratincoles; Stone Curlew; Scops Owl, Purple Heron; Nightingale, Purple Gallinule; Little Bittern plus unexpected Rollers and Whimbrel. There was a fine haul of butterflies and some truly magical Extremaduran moments that come from our many years of experience here. Our hosts Juan-Pedro and Belen were a delight, Hotel Rural Viña las Torres feels like our second home now – and thanks to all of you for your great company, laughter and enthusiasm.

Day 1 We all fly from Gatwick mid-morning and despite a slight delay, our journey to Madrid is a simple process since it's just a short flight with good views over the Pyrenees and the Picos de Europa. We're leaving the airport by 2:00pm, and the weather is a delight with clear blue skies and warm sun to greet an ever-expanding horizon of fields, flowers and wide grasslands scattered with trees and our first Black Kites. An unusual highlight of the journey is our first Black Vulture, just 30 minutes south of Madrid, but our first real stop is a very welcome refreshment break near Talavera taken at a service station. Here, Douglas picks out our first Great Spotted Cuckoo, there are two feeding and courting on the ground with a view too of Corn Bunting, Crested Larks and a distant Montagu's Harrier.

Along the motorway we see White Storks, Cattle Egrets and a few more Black Kites, before winding around the edge of hill-top Trujillo where we turn south. It's a beautiful sunlit afternoon and we then turn on to a narrow road and arrive at Hotel Rural Viña las Torres with its impressive colonial-style stone balconies. Beautiful and tranquil, it has a Moorish feel in the courtyard and as well as a stunning view over the landscape, there's also a very friendly

greeting. We get a tour from the owner, Juan-Pedro, meet JP's wife Belen and their two children Marina and Alexandro and are then shown to our rooms.

Our immediate surroundings however are too good to miss, and there is time for a 6:15pm stroll around the neighbouring lanes, and we walk in sunny skies around the fields, hedgerows and farmsteads right outside. We find Common Cuckoo, Serins, Azure-winged Magpies, some Woodchat Shrikes, Sardinian Warbler, Hoopoes, Short-toed Eagle, Alpine Swifts, Common Buzzard, a distant Montagu's Harrier and Black Kites. In flower there are Loose-flowered Orchids, Viper's Bugloss, and Tassel Hyacinth. There are even some groups of Bee-eaters flying over, and everywhere there are Corn Buntings in song!

After a change before dinner, we are invited to pre-dinner drinks, where we then drive out to the local village of Madroñera, where we enjoy a very nice dinner with wine, and note the saddled horses that, cowboy-style, are hitched outside the restaurant. We drive back to Viña las Torres under a starry sky where we make plans for tomorrow and head for bed.

Day 2 It doesn't get light until about 7:30am (though dusk isn't until 9:00pm) so we eat at 8:00am and the House Sparrows are chattering in the courtyard. After a delicious breakfast buffet we assemble by the vehicles and find Hoopoes, Azure-winged Magpies, Red-rumped Swallows, Woodchat Shrikes, Red and Black Kites and Serins in the gardens – all before we leave home. In fact on the drive out we see very close Hoopoes and Southern Grey Shrikes.

Loading up our packed lunch picnic and with much good humour from our hostess Belen, we depart for the Trujillo bullring – no not out of morbid curiosity but rather to enjoy the pan-tiled roof that plays host to some wonderful early morning Lesser Kestrels, giving some great photographic opportunities. There are oily-plumaged Spotless Starlings 'on the tiles', plus House Martins and Pallid Swifts in the sky. The pools nearby are busy with Coots, Little Grebe and Black-winged Stilts, but good finds are Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, and Little Ringed Plover.

Then it's a short journey to the river Tozo for a walk in the dehesa. The 'dehesa' is the ancient landscape of holm and cork oaks dotted over unspoilt pasture, farmed in this way by Extremaduran communities for centuries and very reminiscent of African acacia savannah. As we arrive there are vultures taking to the wing in a great spiral and we get really close views of Black and Griffons just over our heads. We find pruned branches left for sheep

to nibble before being made into charcoal and see acorns that have been missed by foraging pigs. Birds in the trees are good and we find Woodlark, Serin, Stonechats, and Crested Larks, whilst birds on the wing include low Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, White Storks, a Black Stork and Griffon Vultures. Red-rumped Swallows hawk, there are White Wagtails, and we flush a couple of Snipe as we wander along the river Tozo. The best water birds are on the flooded reservoir amidst the trees where there are Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe, Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Common Sandpiper, Teal and Gadwall. Notable are Greenshank and Spoonbill, plus there is a Little Ringed Plover. Whilst stood here under the trees we find Short-toed Treecreeper and Long-tailed Tits, plus we can hear the bill-clapping display of White Storks.

Flowers include Hooped Narcissus, Barbary Nut, Storksbills and more, and it is a delight to be walking here in the rural tranquility. Mark shows everyone a lovely Spanish Festoon butterfly (plus Adonis and Common Blues, all much to Colin's delight), there are Spanish Terrapins, Iberian Marsh Frogs and Denise and Geraldine spot a Brown Hare. Heading slowly back it becomes warmer – making a picnic under the trees very appealing and we hear the odd call from a hidden Kingfisher and watch Bee-eaters around us.

Driving on and up over the windy ridges we reach the Belen pseudo-steppe grasslands where the trees give way to the plains. It's quite a contrast and here we can see vultures on the ground. We park and get out to admire the gathering of Black and Griffons that are scavenging at a carcass near a farm. We get terrific views of them and above there are more on the wing with Egyptian Vulture, Black & Red Kite too. Further along a cluster of Magpies draw our attention to a couple of parasitic Great Spotted Cuckoos which give marvellous perched and 'fly-by' views. Calandra Larks buzz around in the fields and the sky, whilst our first up-close White Stork's site with resident bird sitting on eggs plays host to some Spanish Sparrows. A ruined farmhouse is host to hawking Lesser Kestrels and on the red, pan-tile roof a Little Owl shelters out of the wind. Further along there are lots more Calandra Larks, a Green Sandpiper and a distant Short-toed Eagle. Douglas is getting the hang of these Corn Buntings now too!

Further down the road we stop to admire the Cattle Egrets, Grey Herons and White Storks and connect with the main prize – Great Bustards. In fact we see a group of seven on the nearby slope of the rolling stony grassland. We enjoy good views of their fine, rich plumage colours, before we rejoin the road to head off in search of some brief Montagu's Harriers and more bustards. We do indeed find more, distant, Great Bustards however the

raptors are the stars here and we find a terrific male Montagu's Harrier, plenty of kites, mating Great Spotted Cuckoos and more Calandra Larks. As we leave the area we spot more Great Bustards – about 11 right out in the open and close in a thistly meadow and when we stop we find that the male puts on a bit of display! What's more, there are also three Little Bustards too in the opposite field, including some males with their heads up – wow! all in the early evening sun.

Earlier, our day had also included watching a pair of Black-shouldered Kites at a site off the beaten track, a wonderful encounter with one of Europe's special birds which we'll never forget – and our journey home means we have to pass yet more great wildlife without stopping. What a day it's been, and it's time to head for the hotel and then out for another dinner in Madroñera.

Day 3 The weather is cool but set to be sunny and we're off to visit spectacular Monfragüe Natural Park, leaving at 8:50am. We take the road north through Trujillo and press on through the unspoilt rolling dehesa where there are Black Kites dotted on the holm oaks – it's been cool overnight and isn't yet warm enough for flying plus Southern Grey Shrikes, Little Egret and White Storks.

The rocky ridges of Monfragüe beckon and cool breezes greet us as we arrive at Peña Falcon rock. It's a spectacular sight, a narrow chasm across the River Tajo with pinnacles of rock on either side, and we've arrived early just as birds are taking to the wing ... big birds! It's perfect timing as the sun is warming the sky and Griffon Vultures which have been tentatively testing the air begin floating on the breeze both above and below us, on 2½ metre wings. There are Egyptian Vultures, Black Kites, and a perched Black Vulture that show really well. A Peregrine is mobbing a Black Kite, there are Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins in the sky and a couple of Choughs pass over high. There a couple of distant Golden Eagles – even a distant Spanish Imperial Eagle – and much nearer a confiding pair of Rock Buntings, singing Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, plus perched Serins and Red-rumped Swallows. A Black Stork which wheels in the air and drops onto the crags reveals neat views of another female Black Stork which begins egg-turning whilst the male comes back and forth bringing nest material. In fact two hours whiz by at this amazing spot, and as the vultures circle and peel away from the rock so do we.

We meander down to the river a little further upstream to take some coffee amidst the trees in the company of singing Nightingale. There's a rare Robin, plus Holly Blue and Speckled Wood butterflies, before we wander onto the

river bridge where a huge, chattering, sociable flock of House Martins are a dazzling sight, not least because there are Alpine Swifts here too which twist and turn right before, and below, us. What with the Crag Martins and Black Kites, plus Booted Eagles it makes for a great stop, but hang on, there are more Griffon Vultures low over our heads and we see Black Vultures too.

We've a grassy lunch spot in mind, where over bocadillos, chorizo, cheese and fruit we're immediately distracted by colourful French Lavender, Spotted Rockrose, Gum Cistus and Purple Spurrey all around us, and then by butterflies such as Berger's Clouded Yellow and Adonis Blue. Our lazy lunch is punctuated by singing Thekla Larks, Woodchat Shrikes, some Serins, a Sardinian Warbler and a Subalpine Warbler, whilst raptors include Booted, and yes, a Bonelli's Eagle which lands on a nearby pylon! All three vultures are here, including a Griffon, and as we head back to the vehicles a pair of Bonelli's Eagle show really well, stalled low in the air above us hunting on the wind – what a finish. A visit to the Park administrative centre at Villareal de San Carlos has many distractions, but not the gift shop which is shut! However Swallows are gathering mud, Crested Larks are running around on the ground whilst vultures sail around overhead. Feeling relaxed we drive north where the scrubby hillsides bear evidence of the felled non-native Eucalyptus and just a short drive north we unwind at Mirador de la Trajadilla where there are plenty of distractions, especially the singing male Black-eared Wheatear that shows well on the fence posts amidst the low elms. Across the river there are low cliffs where Griffon and Egyptian Vultures are nesting, close enough for us to study at leisure and Black Kites show incredibly well. Varied other delights include a Large Psammmodromus lizard, a Wall Brown butterfly, a singing Subalpine Warbler, a Common Sandpiper, and yes, Bonelli's Eagles show well again!

We finally reach the north-east edge of the Park and the river cliffs busy with yet more Griffon Vultures both on the wing and languishing in the afternoon warmth. We work hard to try to get views of the local Eagle Owl site nearby with chicks, no sign, but we'll be returning later – and all is delightfully relaxing watching the Black Storks at their nest, seeing Cleopatra butterfly, and admiring the gliding Griffon Vultures, or at least it is until we pick out a Spanish Imperial Eagle in the sky! We get good views of the distinctive pale leading edge of the wings, whilst listening to the song of Nightingale, and it's a magical moment on which to head back to the restaurant at Villareal for dinner.

After dinner we return to the cliffs, on the way getting amazing views of a Fox which is approaching a group of people, and then further along seeing another doing the same, where with patient scanning we begin to get

views of one of the Eagle Owl chicks, though there's no adult nearby. We watch it for an hour or so, then, just as the sun begins to set, two large chicks scuttle out into full view and an adult flaps up onto a crag above them! After glaring around, this adult flies over our heads and out of view, only to return with prey that it then plucks on a cliff ledge before depositing with the larger of the two chicks, before flying off and away up the valley. All the while another unseen adult has been hooting sonorously from the rocks, and this bird appears as a dramatic ear-tufted silhouette on the skyline (still hooting), before flying off too in the same direction. Wow. It's our cue to head for our hotel, on a real high, after two incredible days here in Extremadura – seeing roadside Red Deer in the darkness as we travel.

Day 4 It's an optional earlier start today and most make the 7:20am departure despite the fact that we've had a late night last night, well, we're eager to make the most of the good weather in the first half of this week. It's only a short journey north to a change of habitat at the 'Cáceres steppes' where beyond Trujillo the 'dehesa' opens up to short-cropped grassy meadows and the sun begins to rise in a grey, cloudy sky. We pull off the road to scan some stony pasture and are rewarded when Mark picks out some Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – our hoped-for bird – and we get good views in the early morning haze-free light. These dove-sized birds are a speciality of the short-cropped stony turf of this pseudo-steppe, and we must be seeing 50 birds or more! There are Calandra Larks, a female Montagu's Harrier, some overhead Bee-eaters, and a number of Black Kites resting on the ground. The Pin-tailed's are spooked by a hunting Monty and remarkably they fly right over our heads giving superlative views.

At Cordel de Ganado we then enter a landscape dotted with Great Bustards! They are a spectacular sight as we view from near the vehicles, and we watch these magnificent birds strutting in silhouette on the skyline and see them feeding in flocks on the ground. We are distracted by a couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse that fly about showing, well, black bellies (!) and giving their delightful purring call, before moving on where we find more in a nearby field, which show incredibly well in the increasing light. We walk up closer along a track and discover at least 30 birds showing so well in the clear light – some of our best views ever. Good views are soon had by all and in fact over the next 30 minutes we obtain ever-better looks at these beautifully marked birds: both in flight (when their black bellies are especially prominent, and their distinctive purring calls can best be heard) and on the ground (when their delicate grey-and-rusty markings can best be appreciated). In fact it's hard to know where to look, as we are encountering more close Great Bustards, including a displaying male turning his wings up to reveal frothing white feathering, and he then begins to (rather

aggressively we think!) mate with a female. The bustards look amazing, as some fly over us on ponderous wings and others stand basking in the full sunshine, their rusty plumage tones enhanced by the light. Calandra Larks give their buzzy song everywhere, seeming to row in the air above us on long, black-looking wings and we drive a little further, seeing a Fan-tailed Warbler on a fence-line. It's an unforgettable sight, and the song of the larks, the rolling vistas all contribute to a perfect Extremaduran moment. It's a shame to scamper quickly past other birds, environs and general ambience of being in this lovely habitat – just as the kites are getting up in the warming air – but we have to get back to Viña Las Torres for another good breakfast!

We have a relaxed spell, freshening up, enjoying our hotel and surroundings, and seeing birds like Serin and Azure-winged Magpie before assembling again where we depart the hotel and head north-wards and pause to scan ridges of the Sierra de Villuercas where Griffon Vultures are taking to the wing. It's a cloudier day, and few raptors are up and about, but in the cistus scrub we find some neat Dartford Warblers, plus have a fun Thekla Lark-Crested Lark comparison. At another scanning point we discover a dead Genet, and while looking at the fur of this elusive mammal, we also discover some very good Rock Sparrows perched on the wires.

We continue, and stop at the river bridge where a Grey Wagtail is on the rocks and we're surprised to get great views of Crested Tits in the holm oaks. There are some well-marked Marsh Frogs and Terrapins, plus Stonechat, Long-tailed Tit, Red-rumped Swallow and Crag Martin. As ever it seems, we see Azure-winged Magpies in the trees, they're beautiful and full of character birds – plus there are Crested Larks and Sardinian Warblers.

Rejoining the road, we wind our way in a southerly direction as the lane becomes ever more scenic, with dry stone walls fringing little fields and meadows. We stop to admire Hoopoes, Northern Wheatear and Rock Sparrows, seeing Short-toed Treecreeper here too, before we reach Cabañas del Castillo where views invite raptor scans - rolling dehesa with open plains beyond seem to stretch forever! Beneath the cork oaks – their bark recently harvested – and nestled under the rocks and mountains that form a jagged spine is a good spot for lunch. Nuthatch and Rock Sparrow pop up in the trees, but it's the ominous rain clouds coming from the west that dominate our thoughts. We drive a short way up to a spectacular viewpoint where the vista gets even more impressive, with a secluded wooded and farmed valley framed by rocky escarpments. Black Redstarts flit about and we get great views of Black Wheatear, which are beautiful birds. A Booted Eagle appears between the showers, and there's a Blue Rock

Thrush but 'rain stops play' and we head back down and out of the mountains

The lanes weave us through mile-upon-mile of beautiful unspoilt landscape filled with small birds, and over-flown by Griffon Vultures and White Storks, but we're delighted when we get back to Viña Las Torres for a delicious dinner prepared by Belen. Our meal is topped off with glasses of uninviting sounding, but unexpectedly delicious local acorn liqueur – Bellota.

Day 5 We set off south for the day, a little earlier than usual as we're keen to make the most of the day. In fact a speedy journey has us 30 minutes later amidst an area that can be good for Roller. It's early in the season but we've had luck here before and soon we're delighted to find not one, but two different birds huddled out of the cold winds! They are incredibly colourful and we even manage some photos. Also here are White Storks, Kestrels, Black Kites and Southern Grey Shrikes.

The stony agricultural fields at Vegas Altas are next where, almost immediately, we find some Tree Sparrows and then locate Black-bellied Sandgrouse. They take to the wing spooked by a hunting Montagu's Harrier but there are at least 50 of them! However, Sandgrouse are not all that are here. Distant Great Bustards strut amidst the cereal crops, Marsh Harriers quarter the scene, Crested and Calandra Larks are in song everywhere, and we obtain some good views of drably-marked, tiny Red Avadavats. A Quail is calling and, from the highest point in this flat land, we're delighted to discover some Collared Pratincoles hawking in the air – just arrived back from Africa – plus a couple of distant Gull-billed Terns go by.

We move on to the Rio Gargáligas for a change of habitat and lunch where a nearby White Stork on a nest eyes us as we scan from a near a quiet river bridge and take in a host of new birds on the reed-choked channel. A singing Nightingale shows really well, Cetti's Warblers and Reed Warbler sing loudly and occasionally show well, there are Snipe, Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpipers lurking along the muddy margins, a distant Great Reed Warbler is in song, plus there are Moorhen and Coot on the water. Some nameless people who venture into the bushes for a comfort stop also find a bonus, a Stripe-less Tree Frog!

The rolling stony steppe beckons but with temperatures cooling and showers on their way we make the most of close Montagu's Harriers and some in-flight Stone Curlews, seen from the vehicles. We make our way over the damn at the Orellana reservoir, and press on south to reach the famous steppe-land of La Serena – the largest grassland area in Europe. It's a wide

open landscape, like an undulating bowl ringed by distant low rocky hills, inhospitable but compelling, and an almost unique habitat in Western Europe. A favourite pool of ours comes up trumps with a fine group of 40 plus Collared Pratincoles, plus we see Cattle Egret, Black-winged Stilt, and gulls such as Black-headed and Yellow-legged, plus Western Dappled White butterfly. We then move on to the rainy steppe-land itself. It's an incredible day really: from far to the west we can anticipate dark, isolated, forbidding showers (quite torrential actually!) that approach us every 20-30 minutes or so, and in between there are spells of golden sunshine when lark song fills the air and birds play in the breezes. The tracks into the interior are a little treacherous (muddy!) but we see some great birds, including some close male Little Bustards, some distant Great Bustards, excellent Montagu's Harriers, flying Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Red-legged Partridge, Tawny Pipit, and Short-toed Lark. A group of Stone Curlews by the roadside, spotted by Ann, are terrific too.

On our way back north we drop down to the shady poplars and nearby water at Orellana where Bee-eaters are on the wing and we see Cormorant and Moorhen. There are some other compelling birds here too: a Penduline Tit is calling and it flies in to begin stripping the heads off the nearby reed-mace which is fantastic. We drive slowly in the afternoon sun to the Embalse de Sierra Brava where the wide-open stretch of water is surrounded by short turf. Crested Larks and Corn Buntings sing nearby and there are Lesser Kestrels in the air, but it is the water birds which keep the telescopes busy and we're soon on to four migrant Whimbrel, Great Crested Grebe, Common Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover. Back at the hotel we change for dinner, enjoy a relaxing drink by the fire, and have a great dinner.

Day 6 Due a more relaxed day, we opt to spend our morning in the beautiful historic town of Trujillo, and we arrive there after a later breakfast, just as the showers finish and the shops begin to open. There are chances for souvenir shopping, including for bottles of that delicious Bellota, cafes selling great coffee and cakes, plus the prospect of exploring the many fabulous buildings around the Plaza Mayor with it's imposing statue of the conquistador Pizarro. It's a delight old medieval town and here our wanderings take us briefly around the buildings in the main square before we head up through narrow cobbled streets to the high terraces and battlements, where there are more panoramic views over the countryside. The birdlife alone would be reason to marvel. In the air Lesser Kestrels are chattering everywhere, there are Pallid Swifts, Black Kites and, best of all, White Storks gliding all around and attendant at precariously arranged nests on the turrets, roofs and bell-towers. They bill-clatter in display, re-arrange nest material, and those sitting

on eggs, keep them warm. We gather after an hour and a half close to the imposing statue of Pizarro – just one of the famous/infamous conquistador sons of Trujillo who, in his case, conquered Peru for Spain and then drive out for more exploration.

At the track to Jabonilla, we take a short walk to look at Little Bustards and Calandra Larks, with vultures circling low over us, before stopping for lunch beneath some holm oaks just as the showers arrive again. Griffon Vultures sit out the rain too in the fields near to us. We then drive over familiar ground, but this time making quicker progress along the quiet, picturesque lanes, oaks, olives and carpets of flowers with small birds everywhere. Spotless Starlings, Red-rumped Swallows, White Storks and more are here but we've been timing our journey around the brightening weather as we plan to look for raptors. So, one advantage of the rain is that, on our arrival at the scenic banks of the narrow Rio Magascar, we're delighted to find two hoped-for Golden Eagles on the wing. They give really good views, soaring slowly and quite low, the male even getting stuck into some roller-coaster displaying in the sky.

We walk down into the quiet valley, flanked by steep slopes of holm oaks and colourful swathes of flowers. There are Spanish Terrapins in the river, whilst Bee-eaters are a bird highlight amongst Grey Wagtail, Azure-winged Magpies and Crag Martins. Even better, the male Golden Eagle sails low over our heads, appearing to check us out, plus a Booted Eagle starts mobbing him – it looks tiny in comparison. Stunning views and again he starts displaying, hurling himself around in the sky!

We head west for a high vantage point by a compelling rolling vista of flowery pasture that stretches for miles, and also by an even more amazing sight – a flock (and they really are) of more than 20 Montagu's Harriers! They appear to be gathering, accompanied by much chattering calls, and are in a tight pack somewhat close to us. It's a truly unforgettable sight and made even more so by the fact that several of the males are displaying to the females in an incredible, 'sky-dancing', aerial ballet – including a Black Kite which is unceremoniously driven off by the Montys! The whole effect is all the more dramatic because we, and the harriers, are bathed in bright sunshine whilst behind them a dark storm is moving slowly, inexorably, our way. We leave getting into the shelter of the vans until the last minute – in fact just as a melanistic 'black' male Monty appears in the flock – but a sudden crack of lightning and an incredibly violent hail storm encourage even Ian and Mark to dive for cover! When the storm has passed there are Montagu's Harriers to be found perched all around us, plus we also see Red Kite, Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Southern

Grey Shrike and Great Bustard, whilst hearing the blowing-a-raspberry call of nearby Little Bustards. All amidst a carpet of purple French Lavender and buttercup pasture.

Finally we reluctantly leave and investigate an area of stony steppe, where a Black Vulture on the ground tears at some sheep bones, a group of 35 Black-bellied Sandgrouse take to the wing, and another melanistic Montagu's Harrier is seen. The next area of olive groves and open meadows, with scattered holm oaks is very scenic in the afternoon sun, plus White Storks are busy in pasture that is awash with daisies and buttercups.

Small birds such as Corn Bunting – ubiquitous - and Azure-winged Magpie are around. Red and Black Kites, Booted and Short-toed Eagles are all on the wing but we head back for an early return to the hotel - it's a suitable moment at which to head for home happy (especially as the rain begins to fall again!).

After yet another truly marvellous dinner, and a fiery sunset, we try to call up the local Scops Owl but it's a no-show – frustrating because we've enjoyed such confiding birds here in the past – but the weather is very cool and the owls seem very quiet. However the night sky is wonderful, it's clear, with no light pollution and there is the terrific sound all around of Mole Crickets.

Day 7 It's our last full day and we've much to do and see despite the ever-present threat of showers. In fact, with Juan-Pedro we've arranged a visit to try again for a Scops Owl with local bird guide Martin Kelsey. Martin has an owl ready and waiting in a tree for us as soon as we arrive in fact! We get terrific views of this tiny bird as it huddles up against the bark, watch some lovely Azure-winged Magpies, and generally enjoy the generous company of Martin with his local birds.

We drive north, where we are amazed to see the distant Gredos mountains completely covered in snow – no wonder we're feeling chilly! Then it's on to the bonus wetland riches of Embalse de Arrocampo, on arrival there doesn't look to be much to see – but first impressions can be deceptive. There are two lagoons with a fringe of reeds and rushes close to a prominent power station with initially few birds on view, however we easily spend an hour and a half here seeing some great birds. Despite the cool breezes, Purple Herons flap about, there are some high Gull-billed Terns, a few Purple Gallinules use their enormous feet to feed on reed rhizomes, and a Night Heron goes over. We get views of Savi's Warblers, a fabulous male Little Bittern perches on brambles by the edge of the water,

and a Kingfisher perches up. There is also a good supporting act with Marsh Harrier, Bee-eater, Cormorant, Great Crested Grebe, Cetti's Warbler, White Storks, and Reed Warblers - easily enough to keep us busy through to coffee break and ready for our lunch! In fact we don't get far next because we find a Black-shouldered Kite plucking prey on a telegraph pole, plus while stopping to admire this we discover a close Great Spotted Cuckoo. Travelling north and west, we drive through mile upon mile of dehesa on the new autovia, where Hoopoes flap across, there are two more Black-shouldered Kites as soon as we turn off and onto quieter lanes! Amidst meadows, poplars and holm oaks we enjoy White Storks, Southern Grey Shrikes and head south and into Monfragüe Natural Park once again. This northerly route is a delight, passing through a charming landscape of meadows and cork oaks, and we make a special effort to take in some indigenous rural sights such as stripped cork oak trees, and especially some of the local black pigs, the cerdo negro, who are the source of the nationally-renowned ham - jamon iberico. Our journey also includes more views of Foxes – three in fact.

Lunch is next, and taken in the sunshine and shade of the cork oaks near to the Portilla del Tietar which is delightfully relaxing amidst the gliding Griffon Vultures, watching Azure-winged Magpie, whilst listening to the song of Nightingale, Short-toed Treecreeper and Cuckoo. We head on as rain appears but at the cliff viewpoint we find the female Eagle Owl! We can enjoy terrific 'scope views of this huge, beautifully marked bird, sat by a rock amidst the low hillside trees – she's within sight of her two youngsters, which amazingly are also fully on show. What a fabulous sight, and it's one that we share with all the other people who come by the viewpoint. The female even flies across to a new vantage point at one stage, and all-in-all it's a marvellous show, with the Nightingale showing nicely too.

The rain begins to fall and we head for the (now open) gift shop at Villareal and then we drive south to Peña Falcon where the vultures in the area are again compelling. There are flying and perched Black Storks, and some perched Red-rumped Swallows give great photo views, but it's the Griffons that are hanging out their wings to dry and sitting on rocks close to us that steal the show. The sun dries the land and they take to the wing as Blue Rock Thrushes sing and Peregrine and Booted Eagle soar.

Our last dinner is a lovely occasion, with pre-dinner drinks to send us on our way. Later, we run through our customary, fun round-up of the week, placing votes for our 'favourites' of the week and thank our hosts Juan-Pedro, Belen, and assistant Angeles for a tremendous welcome. There are so many varied votes for our highlights but Place of the Trip looks like a choice

between Peña Falcon, Portilla del Tietar, and the Montagu's gathering place. Favourite Bird has contenders Eagle Owl, Spanish Imperial Eagle and Great Bustard in competition, whilst 'Magic Moments' are just too diverse for a clear winner – there have been so many good things.

Day 8 It's our last day and a shame to have to leave, but we depart at 6:30am for our journey to Madrid, pausing at a roadside coffee stop, before arriving at the airport for our journey home and farewells. It's been a delightful and triumphant week – we hope that delightful Extremadura remains so wonderful for wildlife for years to come.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Spoonbill
Black Stork
White Stork
Gadwall
Mallard
Pochard
Black-shouldered Kite
Black Kite
Red Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Short-toed Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Lesser Kestrel
Common Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Quail (heard)
Water Rail (heard)
Moorhen
Purple Gallinule
Coot
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Lapwing (heard)
Snipe
Whimbrel
Greenshank
Dunlin
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Feral Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Cuckoo
Barn Owl (heard)
Scops Owl
Eagle Owl
Little Owl
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Common Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
Roller
Hoopoe
Great Spotted Woodpecker
(leaders only)
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Common Redstart (heard)
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Fan-tailed Warbler
Savi's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap

Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Southern Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Chough
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
Tree Sparrow
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Red Avadavat
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch (leaders only)
Cirl Bunting (heard)
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Red Deer
Red Fox
Genet (dead!)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Iberian Marsh Frog
Stripeless Tree Frog
Stripe-necked Terrapin
Large Psammmodromus

BUTTERFLIES

Small White
Large White
Western Dappled White
Clouded Yellow
Berger's Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Cleopatra
Spanish Festoon
Large Tortoiseshell

Painted Lady
Red Admiral
Small Heath
Wall Brown
Speckled Wood
Small Copper
Holly Blue
Brown Argus
Common Blue
Adonis Blue

OTHER INVERTEBRATES

Centipede sp
Oil Beetle
Rhinoceros Beetle
Lesser Emporer
Blue-tailed Damselfly