

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura
10 - 17 April 2010

Guides: Mark Denman and Julian Sykes

Guests: Annie & David Erdman, Andrew Roberts & Brenda Fitzgerald, Arlene Long, Hazel & Peter Buchan, Penny & Keith Chantler, Jacky & Richard Kinsey and Jenny Davis

Day 1: Julian and the guests arrive bang on time in sunny Madrid, meeting other guide Mark who has already been in Extremadura for a week. After a quick bite to eat we're soon on our way south west under beautiful blue skies and its not long before we start to encounter our first birds, with Montagu's Harrier, Booted Eagle and our first White Storks, much to the delight of Arlene! A quick comfort stop adds our first Crested Larks and Corn Buntings of the week, and we pick up some distant vultures, both Griffon and Black.

We soon arrive at our idyllic hotel, Vina las Torres and receive a lovely welcome from Juan Pedro and Belen. After a quick tour of the property we all get settled into our rooms, arranging to meet for a drink before dinner. Richard and Jacky cant wait to get going and start sampling some of the avian wonders of the surrounding area, enjoying Shrikes, Hoopoes and Azure-winged Magpies, while Peter, Keith and Penny enjoy a bracing swim!!

After a wonderful dinner prepared by Belen, Julian and Mark go through the plans for the week and we discuss all the exciting birds we're most looking forward to seeing.

Day 2: We awaken to a beautiful sunny day and after breakfast have a quick scan from the front of the hotel. In no time at all we all enjoy great views of Woodchat Shrikes, Hoopoes, Spanish Sparrows and noisy Azure-winged Magpies amidst a soundtrack of Corn Bunting, Goldfinch and Serin.

After a short drive we make our first stop to scan some ridges where Mark saw Golden Eagle the previous week. Before too long we start to get some really nice overhead views of Griffon and Black Vultures, noting all the diagnostic features. A couple of Woodlarks perch on some wires looking very short tailed next to their crested cousins, but with no sign of any 'goldies' we decide to move on. We've not travelled far when a little group of Bee-eaters have us screeching to a halt, and we all marvel at these incredibly colourful birds that look just spectacular through the scopes. Julian

points out our first pale phase Booted Eagle of the day, and we soon add another new species when an Egyptian vulture cruises past.

Coffee by a beautiful river valley produces new birds like Grey Wagtail and Cirl Bunting, and a perched Short-toed Eagle is most obliging giving prolonged views of its owl like face. Julian's remarkably realistic impression of a Raven encourages two birds passing overhead to call back to him and we find our first Red-rumped Swallows.

Moving on we drive a little higher, leaving the Dehesa behind and park at the picturesque village of Cabanos. Walking up through the village we pass meadows full of wild flowers, the warm sunshine encouraging butterflies such as Black-eyed Blue, Clouded Yellow, and the incredible Spanish Festoon.

Our picnic spot has to be one of the most spectacular viewpoints in Extremadura and we get great views of Peregrine (also eating lunch!) and eye-level encounters with Red-rumped Swallows and Alpine Swifts. The scratchy song of Sub-Alpine Warbler surrounds us and Andrew points out our first Blue Rock Thrush. Black Redstarts and Rock Buntings flit amongst the boulders and we pick out a couple of distant Short-toed Eagles, though a very brief Crested Tit is only seen by some.

A little further down the road we pause to check a well known Bonelli's Eagle territory and we've not been scanning long when an adult bird appears overhead giving terrific views of this most distinctive rare Eagle. On the cliffs here we get our first 'scoped views of Griffon Vultures and add Short-toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch to our list, also managing our best views of Sardinian Warbler.

Heading towards the Belen Plains we drive through a beautiful area of dehesa passing what seems like a Woodchat Shrike every few yards! We come across a really big group of Vultures on the edge of some farmland, getting wonderful views of birds both flying and on the ground, the Black Vultures seeming noticeably bigger than the Griffons when perched. Peter finds a nice male Stonechat, and with a supporting cast of Black Kites, Egyptian Vultures and Booted Eagles we have to tear ourselves away, though not before Richard has un-earthed a Natterjack Toad!

The drive towards Belen produces lots more Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Whinchat, two Little-ringed Plovers on a little pool and some Cattle Egrets-with Cattle!! Little groups of Lesser Kestrel hunt together and we find a couple of Great-spotted Cuckoos in the long grass. A short detour up a rather dusty, bumpy track rewards us with our first Bustards of the

holiday when we find a splendid male Great Bustard, surrounded by his adoring harem! He puts on an incredible 'pom-pom' display and we can't help laughing when the drooling females peck at him!

With time marching on we have to tear ourselves away, pausing briefly to admire the Great-spotted Cuckoos that are now posing obligingly in a bush right next to the track, and another group of Great Bustards that provide a wonderful end to our first memorable day in Extremadura.

Day 3: The day dawns sunny again and starts with the biggest moth in Europe, a Peacock moth that proves very popular with the photographers amongst us. Julian and Mark hear a Wryneck calling at the front of the hotel and the deep fluted whistle of a Golden Oriole, but more of that another day!

We're heading to Monfrague National Park today, one of the best areas in Europe for watching birds of prey, but before we go there Julian takes us to a lovely area of scrubby habitat that is very good for 'Sylvia' Warblers.

The first bird that grabs our attention however is altogether larger in the shape of a Short-toed Eagle sitting in a tree! We get good views of Thekla Lark and discuss the subtle differences between them and their very similar crested cousins and Julian picks up on the 'hurdy-gurdy' song of a Western Orphean Warbler, and with a little 'encouragement' it eventually shows really well, most of us even seeing it in the telescopes. Andrew points out a nice 'ring-tail' Monty's Harrier and we get great views of a Dartford Warbler. A short walk through the scrubby habitat soon gives up the subject of our quest with incredible views of two or three Spectacled Warblers that song-flight and sing from the tops of bushes just a few yards away. We're all delighted by these, dainty little Whitethroat like, Warblers, though no one more so than Mark who has never seen this bird in Spain before - thanks Julian!!

Delightful though all of this is we've got bigger things on our minds today and head towards Monfrague, eagerly anticipating the spectacle (no pun!) that awaits us. As we approach Pena Falcon rock the excitement mounts as we can see dozens and dozens of vultures spiralling around the huge peaks. The Griffons look huge as they pass overhead, some very close, and we pick out a few Black Vultures amongst them. Our first Black Storks of the holiday appear here and other birds include a group of seven noisy Ravens, a couple of Chough and one or two Egyptian vultures. Peter finds a nice Rock Bunting and we get good views of Blue Rock Thrush, whose fluted song fills the air. A Peregrine puts in a brief appearance and Julian brilliantly picks out a distant Black Wheatear.

We have lunch at the little town of Villareal and enjoy a couple of Hawfinches with our sandwiches, which pleases Andrew as he's always wanted to see one. Some of us have a look round an exhibition and some enjoy an ice-cream before heading back out into the park to find some more exciting wildlife. At another towering rock face we marvel at many more Griffon Vultures and get fabulous views through the scopes of some smaller Egyptian Vultures with their bright yellow faces. Smaller birds show nicely here in the shape of Sub-alpine Warbler and Rock Buntings, and a couple of Short-toed Eagles pass overhead, but it's terribly hot and we decide to head back to Villareal for more ice-cream, and in some cases beer!!

We haven't seen Spanish Imperial Eagle yet, so Julian and Mark decide to head back to an area that has been reliable in the past. Spanish Gatekeepers are on the wing and some of us get good views of Iberian Wall Lizard, but the only birds in the sky seem to be Black, both Kite and Vulture. With dinner time fast approaching we have a final scan and Julian picks up an interesting bird approaching from the ridge to the left and as it banks the unanimous cry of 'Imperial Eagle!' goes up, and although distant we all manage to follow what is the rarest of all Eagles in the telescopes.

We're eating out tonight to enable us to try and see Eagle Owl and after some delicious Spanish fayre we head back to Tietar del Portilla, pausing briefly to admire a little group of Rock Sparrows on a bridge. Our arrival at Portilla could hardly be more exciting as we are treated to incredible views of a sub-adult Spanish Imperial Eagle as it cruises past us, staying in view for a good five minutes, and static soaring above our heads-fantastic!!

We enjoy terrific views of a pair of Black Storks on their nest amongst the many Griffon Vultures, and with the light fading and the last chorus of birdsong dying away we hear the deep call of an Eagle Owl coming from the cliff before us. A few minutes pass before the calls cease and this magnificent bird takes to the air, flying across the valley and right over our heads before disappearing behind the ridge behind us, a thrilling end to another memorable day.

Day 4: The focus of our attention today is an area of steppe grassland and farmland that provides the home for some very special birds. Our first intended stop is scuppered by two vans parked in 'our space!' but a pull-in just up the road proves to be very successful with good views of both Great and Little Bustard within two minutes of getting out of the vans!

The air is thick with the ecstatic buzzing song of Calandra Lark and the shorter phrases of Short-toed Lark, and before long we hear the distinctive

gull like calls of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. We're thrilled when from beyond the ridge upwards of fifty birds take to the sky, wheeling around, group splitting and disappearing into the distance.

Julian picks out a Tawny Pipit in the long grass and a Montagu's Harrier drifts gracefully past. We take a rough track into the heart of the habitat stopping periodically to scan, four Black-bellied Sandgrouse fly over and appear to land further up the track, so we decide to follow, pausing briefly to watch a surprise Great Egret that flies overhead. From a good viewpoint further up the track we start searching for the Sandgrouse, whilst being serenaded by a song-fighting Short-toed Lark. In no time at all we pick up the Black-bellied Sandgrouse, although they are rather distant and we are about to move a little closer when Richard finds another little group much closer that look really handsome through the scopes.

A little further on we watch Great Bustard displaying, find a couple more Little Bustards and watch a group of vultures on a carcass. We find a Little Owl on a dry stone wall and another Tawny Pipit flies over. With coffee time approaching we head to a little bar in Santa Marta and enjoy some delicious coffee and biscuits, Julian surprising us all with a stuffed Pin-tailed Sandgrouse from behind the bar!

Moving on, we stop for lunch by a picturesque river with Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins hawking over the water. Richard, a keen fisherman finds some Spanish Barbel and the keen botanists amongst us enjoy some Sawfly Orchids. As seemingly everywhere we go we are surrounded by Bee-eaters and a solitary Red kite drifts past.

Driving on through the mixture of dehesa and grassland we arrive at 'Monty junction' and despite the increasing rainfall we're treated to a dozen or so of these beautiful raptors as they dance over the crop fields before us. With the rain increasing and the activity decreasing we decide to make our way to a Black-shouldered Kite territory and as luck would have it we arrive in lovely sunshine! After looking at a little colony of White Storks in some Pines, we walk down the track, flowers looking lovely after the rain. Almost straight away Julian picks up a distant Black-shouldered Kite that is mobbing a Red Kite, and although a long way off we all manage to see this distinctive, diminutive raptor. It appears and re-appears from behind a distant tree, so we decide to walk a little further and are rewarded with good 'scoped views of one of the birds sitting preening.

A couple of Yellow Wagtails fly over on the walk back and over a cup of coffee and rather nice cake we watch at least three Short-toed Eagles that drift over. Another great day!

Day 5: A few of us can't resist a bit of pre-breakfast birding this morning and the highlights include Jenny finding her first ever Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, David and Annie having a close encounter with 'sharpei' Green Woodpecker and Richard unearthing a False Smooth snake and scorpion!

After Breakfast some of us manage brief views of a stunning male Golden Oriole before heading off to the Bullring in Trujillo to look at the Lesser Kestrel colony. Unfortunately by the time we get there the rain is quite heavy and there are very few birds on show, so before going for a walk through the dehesa to a little lake we stop for a coffee, hoping it might ease off a little. By the time we park the vans by the river the rain has all but stopped and we set off on our walk, enjoying the flowers such as Star of Bethlehem and Hoop petticoat.

The first birds we see on arrival at the lake are a group of six Spoonbills, a great favourite with David, soon followed by several Little Egrets and a couple of distant Great Egrets. Waders include lots of Black-winged Stilts, Greenshank and Common Sandpiper, and wildfowl here include Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall and Richard finds a couple of Pintail. A typically brief Kingfisher dashes past, and while watching a couple of obliging Short-toed Treecreepers Hazel picks out a small warbler that Julian identifies as Iberian Chiff-chaff.

We have our lunch on the Belen Plains and highlights here include Great and Little Bustards, our first Marsh Harrier of the week and a couple of Little Owls. As we're eating out in Trujillo tonight we start heading back towards the hotel, passing several Montagu's Harriers and lots of Northern Wheatears. Large numbers of Goldfinch adorn the fences, and we get close views of Lesser Kestrels hunting together. Unfortunately the heavy rain has taken its toll on the track and we have to turn back after a couple of miles, stopping briefly to look at a Spanish Terrapin that appears in front of Mark's van!

After freshening up at the hotel we head into the delightful medieval town of Trujillo. A huge statue of the great/infamous conquistador Pizarro towers above the main square, the Plaza mayor, and some of us chose to sit in one of the many cafes and pick out Pallid Swifts from the Common variety. After exploring the narrow cobbled streets and enjoying fabulous views from the

battlements at the top of the town, we meet back in the Plaza mayor and go for a nice meal in a very welcoming little restaurant just off the square.

Day 6 We're heading south today, but not before our morning 'fix' of Golden Oriole, found today for us by Brenda! At our first port of call Julian immediately finds a couple of Little Owls that look typically fierce as they stare back at us! A search of the rocky grassland soon produces a few Great Bustards, with Monty's and Marsh Harriers popping up all around. With Fan-tailed Warblers 'zitting' in the background we pick up several Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight that seemingly 'disappear' when they land in the vegetation obviously rather deeper than it looks.

This habitat looks perfect for Stone Curlew and careful scanning produces two of these odd looking birds, whilst David's tenacious search pays off when he manages to find the Sandgrouse! We get some super views of both Great and Little Bustard here and have hardly rejoined the main road when Julian comes to a halt, no doubt dazzled by the splendid Roller sitting on some roadside wires!

After a comfort and coffee stop we make our way past some pools that are home to Little Grebe, Little Ringed Plover and large numbers of Cattle Egret. Annie spots a Purple Heron, but unfortunately it disappears into a ditch before anyone else can get on it. Far easier to see are the seventy or so Turtle Doves that line the wires further along the track and most of us get a brief view of a Quail that dashes for cover!

We've hardly tucked into our lunch when Julian finds a Black Tern amongst the Black headed Gulls, a very good bird here, more expected being the Gull-billed Terns that drift into view. There then follows a bizarre moment when Julian very excitedly shouts "I can see a Crane!!!" and we all laugh, thinking he's joking - only for him to repeat his 'joke' and we all turn to see that a Common Crane has appeared on the track before us! This is a very well known wintering site for Cranes, but they should have gone weeks ago and we speculate that perhaps all is not well. However, as we start walking the track the enormous bird takes to the air and circles around us, much to our relief. Several handsome Yellow Wagtails catch our attention as does a Whiskered Tern and some much more obliging Gull-billed Terns.

With the rain starting to fall we decide to head back to the vans and move on. At our next stop we find a few Tree Sparrows amongst the more numerous House Sparrows, and as we start to drive the track through the farmland the heavens well and truly open and we've no option other than sitting it out. Despite fifteen minutes of incredibly hard rain the track still

seems fine so we continue on, finding twenty or so Great Bustards, Red Avadavat and some very close Gull-billed Terns, though the main target here, Collared Pratincole sadly eludes us.

At a final brief stop we manage to glimpse a fairly 'red' Red Avadavat! some more Tree Sparrows and a Green Sandpiper, but with more rain in the air we clamber back into the vans and head back to Vina las Torres for another of Belen's lovely Spanish meals.

Day 7 We begin what should be our final day with the news that a certain volcano in Iceland is causing havoc with flights in and out of Britain. After a quick conference we decide to continue with the day as planned, once more enjoying views of the Golden Oriole that seems to have taken up residence in front of the hotel.

We head north to some reed-beds next to a power station. This is very unusual habitat in Extremadura and it gives us the opportunity to see many new birds. On arrival Mark goes off to phone the office while Julian starts to point out some of the many denizens of this special habitat. There are familiar birds such as Reed and Sedge Warbler, and less familiar birds such as Great Reed Warbler with its far carrying croaky song and Savi's Warbler with its monotonous reel. Cetti's Warblers are singing their explosive song, but as usual prove difficult to see! Larger birds here include many Purple Herons in flight and continuing the 'purple' theme Purple Swamp-hens that occasionally show very well on the edge of the reeds. A couple of Whitethroats are a good find by Richard and we get good views once more of some Gull-billed Terns.

The news from the office is not very encouraging, so with much to do we decide to head back to the hotel, stopping briefly for lunch at the 'Goldy' territory of the first day. Once more there are many vultures on the wing and the sweet song of Thekla Lark fills the air, but this time our luck is in as an adult Golden Eagle soars above us, its long tail in contrast to the vultures it shares the sky with.

Back at the hotel Mark and Julian start their long round of phone calls and everyone else gets the opportunity to explore the lanes, nooks and crannies with all the birds on offer here.

After dinner we all discuss our favourite moments from the week. Great Bustard and Eagle Owl take most of the plaudits for species of the trip, while Monfrague is as popular as ever, however, with more time than usual spent around Vina Las Torres we have a worthy tie for first place. Magic moments

are of course very personal and there have been so many this week I think we all really struggled to choose, but once again the Eagle Owl was very popular when it left its hiding place on the cliff before us and sailed majestically over our heads. Fantastic!

EPILOGUE

I could probably write a book about what happened over the next six days (I might one day!) but for now I would just like to make some heartfelt thank-you's. First of all to my partner in crime this week Julian Sykes - not just for his brilliant birding skills and site knowledge that led to many unexpected birds, but for sticking around under difficult circumstances, it made a big difference.

Secondly a special thank-you to Juan Pedro, Belen and family for changing your plans for us when there was 'no room at the Inn'. As ever, you made us feel as if we were members of your family.

A big thank-you to Norman Haynes, a guest on the first week, who agreed to drive the second van from Madrid to Bilbao. And last but definitely not least, a MASSIVE thank-you to all in the office (you know who you are!) who worked so tirelessly to get us home both in comfort and safety.

So, there it is, we ended up having a big adventure together with time to explore Madrid and an exciting sea crossing thrown in. I would just like to thank everyone on the holiday once more for your patience, trust and understanding - you made my job so much easier than it could have been, and I look forward to seeing you all again very soon.

Best wishes,
Mark.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Fulmar (ferry)
Cory's Shearwater (ferry)
Gannet (ferry)
Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Spoonbill
Greylag Goose
Mallard
Gadwall
Pintail
Shoveler
Teal
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Golden Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Red Kite
Black Kite
Black-shouldered Kite
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Quail
Moorhen
Coot
Purple Swamp- Hen
Common Crane
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Stone Curlew
Little Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Turnstone (ferry)
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Greenshank
Snipe
Great Skua (ferry)
Arctic Skua (ferry)
Black-headed Gull
Herring Gull (ferry)
Lesser Black Backed Gull (ferry)
Greater Black Backed Gull (ferry)
Sandwich Tern (ferry)
Gull-billed Tern
Black Tern
Whiskered Tern
Guillimot (ferry)
Razorbill (ferry)
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Eagle Owl
Barn Owl
Little Owl
Scops Owl
Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpinre Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Green Woodpecker (sharpei)
Lesser spotted Woodpecker
Wryneck (Mark and Julian)
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Short-toed lark
Calandra Lark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit

White Wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Wren
Robin
Nightingale
Redstart
Black Redstart
Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Whinchat
Stonechat
Blue Rock Thrush
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blackcap
Orphean Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Whitethroat
Spectacled Warbler
Sub-alpine Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Willow Warbler
Iberian Chiffchaff
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Woodchat Shrike
Iberian Grey Shrike
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jay
Carrion Crow
Raven
Spotless Starling
Golden Oriole
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow

Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Serin
Hawfinch
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Red Deer
Greater Horseshoe Bat
Pipistrelle
Long-finned pilot Whale (ferry)
Striped Dolphin (ferry)

BUTTERFLIES

Spanish Festoon
Clouded Yellow
Western-dappled White
Small White
Large White
Orange Tip
Small Copper
Spanish Gatekeeper
Green Hairstreak
Holly Blue
Black-eyed Blue
Large Tortoiseshell
Peacock Moth

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Spanish Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Natterjack Toad
Common Toad
Marbled Newt
Moorish Gecko
False Smooth Snake
Worm Lizard
Iberian Wall Lizard
Fire Salamander