

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura Winter
8–13 November 2012

Guide: Mark Denman

Guests: Annette Hall, Mary Donnelly, Garry Heath & Alison Frogley and Sheila Colquhoun & Clem Hindmarch

Day 1: We all meet up at Gatwick at the crack of dawn and after a few shenanigans with an unmarked bag in the hold we're on our way south to Madrid. We're greeted by torrential rain and a baggage handlers dispute, but fortunately the delay isn't too long and after a quick bite to eat we set off, leaving the urban sprawl of Madrid behind and encountering our first birds, Spotless Starlings, Red Kites and a few White Storks. There are brief sightings of Griffon Vulture and Hoopoe as we drive and as we have a bit of spare time we decide to have a quick look at the reed-beds at Arrocampo.

A splendid Black-shouldered Kite has us screeching to a halt and we get terrific views as it poses on roadside wires - what a start with one of the most sought after of birds in this region! Only a couple of us see a brief Iberian Grey Shrike but we all see the Marsh Harriers that are quartering the reed-beds. A couple of really sandy Crested Larks are nice and we also see lots of Chiffchaffs and a couple of Fan-tailed Warblers here. Cetti's Warblers scold from thick cover and a Cormorant looks most odd sitting in the middle of the road!

With the rain lashing down again we head for the sanctuary of Vina Las Torres and are welcomed by the charming Juan Pedro and a roaring open fire!!! After a little time to unpack we enjoy a welcome drink and the first of Belen's imaginative meals whilst being serenaded by daughter Marina who treats us to Chopin and Bach. It's been a long day, so after a quick chat about our plans for the next few days we head for bed, looking forward to some improving weather and lots of great birds.

Day 2: The day dawns dry but rather foggy and after breakfast we set off to an area of mixed steppe grassland and farmland to look for our first Sandgrouse and Bustards but unfortunately by the time we reach the first area we want to search the fog has thickened and all we can see are some very close Lapwings, Corn Buntings and Meadow Pipits.

Just as we make the decision to try here later the mist clears, so we all clamber out and start scanning. Sheila soon finds our first Great Bustards, a little group of females on the horizon and we soon find a group of Little Bustards that are a bit closer. A female Marsh Harrier then spooks the Little Bustards and we realise there must have been quite a few more beyond the ridge as they take to the air revealing their attractive black and white flight feathers.

We have been hearing the beautiful sound of Cranes since we arrived and we finally see some that drift past, but more, much more of that later! Some distant Rock Sparrows share a fence with some Common Starlings but we get much better views of some mighty Calandra Larks mixed in with the local Crested Larks and wintering Skylarks and Meadow Pipits. A few Golden Plover amongst the Lapwings are a nice find but although some of us hear the bubbling calls of some Black-bellied Sandgrouse they remain hidden-for now!

Our next stop is at a big reservoir that is home to huge numbers of wildfowl in the winter. There are big numbers of Coot and Great-crested Grebe close by and rather more distant are huge rafts of Duck. The vast majority are Mallard and Shoveler but with a bit of searching we manage to find Gadwall, Wigeon and Pintail as well. Ravens, Jackdaws and Crag Martins patrol the Dam and in the rice fields below us we see hundreds of Common Crane, another taster of things to come!

After coffee and cake in a little local bar we head off again, pausing to admire a smart male Black Redstart and some Lovely 'oily' Spotless Starlings. Driving a road that has been newly surfaced we see hundreds of Cattle Egret and by some little pools a couple of Little Egret and Little Grebe. We seem to flush Hoopoes every few hundred yards and stop to take a little walk next to a small plantation. An Iberian Grey Shrike looks great in the sun and there are a large group of Cranes visible through reed-beds that look fantastic through the scopes. It's not just big birds on show here though as we see lots of Spanish Sparrows and the charming introduced Red Avadavats and Common Waxbills, the Avadavats proving particularly popular. It's a lovely place with Cranes constantly flying over calling, and the sun has encouraged a few late butterflies onto the wing including Small White, Bath White and Small Copper. Garry spots a few Serin and we also see Tree Sparrow and Linnet here.

We have our lunch by a river in the sunshine along with lots of Spanish Sparrows, Long-tailed Tits and the ever elusive Cetti's Warblers. There are more Waxbills and Avadavats here, but only Garry and Mark see the Kingfisher that flashes past. At Vegas Altas we scan some flooded rice fields and find a lone Common Snipe amongst lots of Egrets and Storks before moving a little closer to some Cranes and Great Bustards. We manage to get some shots of the Cranes and scoped views of the Bustards that look much more colourful than the murky views we had earlier! It seems that all the surrounding fields are full of Cranes and they look and sound superb as they take to the air, along with lots of little groups of Avadavats or flying strawberries as we have renamed them that dart in and out of the trackside ditches. Annette spots our first Hen Harrier, a ring-tail that is hunting close by and we get great views as it works its way back and forth-very nice!

We find a nice spot for a coffee overlooking an area that is just alive with birds! Huge numbers of Crane are here and we marvel as squadron after squadron pass overhead dropping down and joining the assembled masses. There are lots

of Great Bustards too and we see our second Hen Harrier - this time a young grey bird that joins the much more numerous resident Marsh Harriers. Alison then brilliantly picks out some Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight that unfortunately fly just out of view, but then two closer birds land amongst the Cranes and we all eventually manage to see them through the scopes though they are incredibly difficult to pick out as they creep through the vegetation. Their cryptic plumage works superbly but with a bit of perseverance you can just about make out a black belly or two - superb!

Lovely though this all is, a huge wall of weather is fast heading our way so we decide a hasty retreat is called for and start heading back to the hotel. We then drive through some amazingly heavy rain and 'enjoy' some very good views of lightning as we make our way back to the main road. Back at Vina Las Torres we enjoy the first of our wine tasting sessions with Juan Pedro before enjoying another of Belen's delicious meals, all the while reflecting on what has been a memorable first day.

Day 3: We have a slightly earlier breakfast this morning as we hope to explore another area that is very good for Bustards and Sandgrouse. We set off after breakfast and pass the medieval town of Trujillo and before long we enter an area of grassland that has been very productive in the past. A couple of Iberian Grey Shrike are close by and we've not been scanning long when Garry finds a couple of Little Bustards that are hunkered down in some long grass. A very showy Dartford Warbler is a nice surprise here and just as we start admiring this little Sylvia warbler we hear the calls of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse filling the air. We locate a flock of about seventy birds flying around the horizon and when they appear to land in the next field we climb back in the van and head off in pursuit! We soon pick them up and when they are about a hundred yards in front of us we pull off the road to set up the scopes, temporarily ignoring the fact that the van seems to have sunk a little in some soft mud! The light is just perfect and we enjoy absolutely superb views of these most beautiful birds, in fact we have the most prolonged views Mark has ever had of this elusive species, although this is largely due to the fact that we are indeed stuck in the mud and have to wait for Juan Pedro to come and rescue us - thank heaven for mobile phones! Alison also points out some Griffon Vultures sitting in a nearby tree and Mary finds a nice female Sardinian Warbler here and when JP has pulled us out we head for a comfort stop and a mid-morning coffee.

Suitably refreshed we set off again and have a look at a ridge that can be good for raptors. With the morning fog slowly clearing we get good views of both Griffon and the rare Black Vulture and after a little practice we're all experts at ID'ing these two huge denizens of the air. We get brilliant views of Woodlark as it sings its sweet song from overhead and Clem is particularly pleased with the Thekla Lark that poses for us, enabling all the diagnostic features to be ticked off.

We have our picnic near the charming little town of Cabanas and whilst munching our sandwiches we hear both Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper, though

despite much searching both remain hidden. A Great Spotted Woodpecker flies through and we keep our eyes on the sky as this is a well known territory of Bonelli's Eagle. We want to go for a short walk up through the town to a spectacular viewpoint, but before that we just head a little further up the road to have a last check for Bonelli's Eagle. We've hardly got out of the van when a sub-adult eagle appears over a nearby ridge and we clamber out to get a terrific view as this most distinctive and rare bird soars overhead, slowly drifting away on the wind - brilliant stuff! Noisy Jay and Crested Tit here remain hidden in the dense bushes and trees so we turn around and head back to Cabanas for our walk.

Male and female Black Redstart on the path before us are nice as is the Sardinian Warbler that calls like an old fashioned football rattle. Garry glimpses a male Blue Rock Thrush high on the cliffs and we get brief views as it flies to and fro before finally reaching our destination and the breathtaking views across a spectacular valley. Another Blue Rock Thrush appears high above us but sadly doesn't linger, and with the weather starting to deteriorate we head back down to the van and start heading back to the hotel. We cross the Belen Plains in the hope of seeing some Bustards but by the time we reach the best area for the birds the rain is tipping down so we reluctantly call it a day, although with more wine tasting, Belen's food, not to mention the roaring open fire its not too much of a hardship!!

Day 4: What a difference a day makes! We awaken to beautiful blue skies and the promise that it will stay like that. We're spending the day in the famous Monfrague area but want to check the reed-beds at Arrocampo en route as the weather defeated us on our first day. As we approach the reed-beds a Black-shouldered Kite lands on a nearby telegraph pole and while looking at it through the scopes we notice that another kite is nearby. The two birds show superbly as they hawk over the area with their characteristic Nightjar like flight and when perched we can even see the striking red eye! At the reed-beds our main quarry is Purple Swamp Hen but although we can hear one croaking away the only birds in view seem to be Coots and Moorhens. There seems to have been an invasion of Chiffchaffs and the ever present Cetti's Warblers prove as hard to see as ever! We cross the road to try our luck there and hear a Swamp Hen crashing around in the reeds quite close by but unfortunately only Garry sees it as it flies away. Penduline Tits call from the reeds and we see four of these charming little birds as they fly across the road. We do find a beautiful woven Penduline nest hanging from a tree and Garry and one or two others see a brief Barn Owl - an excellent find.

As we make our way towards Monfrague we pass another Black-shouldered Kite on some roadside wires and as we approach the towering cliffs of Portilla del Tietar we can see large numbers of Griffon Vultures soaring on the thermals. We've not been scanning long when our first Spanish Imperial Eagle appears high above our heads and when a second bird appears we are treated to an amazing show as they 'play' with the hapless Griffons easily out manoeuvring the bigger vultures. We all manage scope views of these magnificent eagles with their brilliant white epaulettes

shining in the warm sunshine as they bank towards us and we head towards the little town of Villareal thrilled by our views of what is now the rarest eagle in the world!

While driving we pass little parties of Azure-winged Magpies, a few Red Deer and a couple of brief Hawfinches, and after a comfort stop in Villareal we make our way to a spectacular spot for lunch overlooking a river banked by huge cliffs either side. As we walk to the picnic tables a couple more Hawfinches appear briefly and while enjoying our lunch we keep an eye on the skies as this is a good spot for another rare eagle, the very distinctive Bonelli's. A female Sardinian Warbler shows very well as we munch our sandwiches and after about half an hour of just Griffons and the odd Black Vulture an adult Bonelli's Eagle suddenly appears overhead, soon joined by another one. Frustratingly both birds slip away before everyone sees them, but we needn't have worried as they both re-appear soon after putting on an incredible show as the male bird displays with breathtaking stoops and culminating with an amazing pursuit of a Feral Pigeon below us over the river - amazingly the pigeon manages to slip away but not before Mark enjoys the best views he's ever had of this superb species (the eagle that is!).

Our next port of call is at Pena Falcon, another big Griffon Vulture colony. Unfortunately the wind has really got up, and although there are good opportunities to photograph the vultures as they sail past, small birds are hard to come by in these conditions so we're very pleased when Mary points out a smart female Blue Rock Thrush sheltering from the wind - very nice! After a little time in Villareal where at least one of us has an ice cream (!) we set off again stopping to admire and attempt to photograph some Azure winged Magpies. A Red Deer hind is a little more co-operative than the magpies and Alison actually sees it swim across the river below! We do eventually get our best views of the magpies as they visit the picnic tables for scraps but with bigger 'fish' to fry we head back to Portilla del Tietar to finish the day.

Lots of little Egrets are commuting down the river and the vultures are beginning to settle on their ledges for the night and once again we are treated to breathtaking views of Imperial Eagle as it patrols the cliffs, its epaulettes actually looking pink in the setting sun. We can't believe our luck when the eagle lands in a tree across the narrow valley giving frame filling views in the scopes as it scolds and chastises any vulture that dares land too close - the vultures may be bigger but there's no doubt who's the boss!! As the sun sets we get more views of the eagle but sadly the Eagle Owl fails to put in an appearance so we make our way back to Villareal for dinner, seeing lots of Red Deer as we go and back at Vina Las Torres turn the scope on Jupiter and its four moons - an amazing end to another memorable day in this magical place.

Day 5: Our last day in Extremadura dawns beautiful again and after another tasty breakfast we set off for our final adventure together. Our first stop is at a little river where we will walk through the dehesa to a small lake to look for some water birds.

Beautiful sounds fill the clear morning air with Cranes calling all around mixed in with the sweet song of Woodlark and rattling Corn Buntings. A Woodlark song-flights as it passes and we can see the really short tail - a real feature of this species, and Garry points out a nice perched Red Kite. Stonechats and Chiffchaffs abound and we see another new bird when Garry finds a Great White Egret. Passing a rather nervous group of cows we make our way to the little lake. Sheila finds a Common Sandpiper which is actually quite a scarce bird here and we also see a couple of Green Sandpipers, but the wet conditions mean that there is plenty of habitat for wintering waders so they will be more spread out than usual. There are quite a few ducks here however and we see Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard and add Teal to our list as well as finding a couple more Great Egrets and a Grey Wagtail.

After a coffee we decide to head back to the area south of where we are staying where we hope to find some more waders amongst the rice fields. As expected there are huge numbers of Common Crane here but apart from a few Lapwings waders are rather thin on the ground. Marsh Harriers seem to be everywhere you look and Garry does well to point out a nice grey Hen Harrier. Little parties of Avadavats pop up now and then and we do eventually find some waders as we drive through the narrow roads that cut through the maze of rice fields. About twenty or so Greenshank are busy feeding on some exposed mud and we also see several Common Snipe here along with a single Dunlin. We get our closest views of Little Egret and Cattle Egret here along with a few White Storks and at our lunch spot we find three Black-winged Stilt that are popular as ever.

Moving on, we cut back across country over some steppe grassland in the hope of getting better views of bustards. Mary points out a Common Buzzard sat right next to the road and Annette does really well to pick out some Little Bustards. It's only when we get out of the vehicle that we realise that there are a lot of Little Bustards much closer and we get brilliant views of these wonderful birds - some of the males still showing some of the black on their necks. The ecstatic song of Calandra Lark surrounds us as we head to Vegas Altas for our final session passing many Common Kestrels and Hoopoes on roadside wires. Once again Marsh Harriers seem to be everywhere you look and we get our best views of Great Bustard here, the beautiful winter sunshine showing their gorgeous colours off perfectly - we even manage a few shots before they take to the air. There is quite a lot of disturbance where we are which seems to be bothering the Cranes and bustards so we head for the other side of the rice fields where a lot of the Cranes seem to be heading for.

Massive flocks of Spanish Sparrow adorn the few trees of the area and when they take to the air the results are quite spectacular! A Hoopoe lands close on a derelict building and squadron after squadron of Cranes land under some distant trees. The sound of the massed ranks of Sparrow and Cranes making it a truly memorable experience. There seem to be birds all around and Clem and Sheila find another nice little group of Avadavats and Waxbills that they enjoy very much. A brief

Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight is too quick for most, but we all see a nice, if distant male Merlin that sits in the middle of a muddy field.

We enjoy a coffee and some of Belen's delicious home made cake in the lovely sunshine and manage to locate a little group of Sandgrouse that even through the scopes can only be seen when they move! We retrace our steps and manage to move much closer to the Sandgrouse and get wonderful views of these highly cryptic birds as they move stealthily through the rough ground, noting their beautiful markings and jet black bellies-fantastic! We're so engrossed in these secretive birds that we don't notice a group of about thirty Great Bustards in the next field, but thankfully Alison is on the ball and points them out to us!

With time marching on we head back to the hotel enjoying the beautiful sunset as we go and while unloading the van we see two bats, a tiny Pipistrelle and a mighty Serotine. It's been another wonderful visit to Extremadura, a visit that we will never forget and special thanks go as always to Juan Pedro and Belen for making us so welcome in their beautiful home.

Great Bustards and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse are popular for species of the trip with other votes going to Spanish Sparrow, Hoopoe, Thekla Lark, Black-shouldered Kite and Red Avadavat.

Place of the trip is dominated by Vegas Altas, with other votes going for Monfrague, Vina Las Torres and the steppes. And finally magic moments included looking at Jupiter through the scope, Imperial Eagle perched, watching Black-shouldered Kites and finding Sandgrouse!

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
White Stork
Greylag Goose
Gadwall
Widgeon
Mallard
Pintail
Shoveller
Teal
Tufted Duck
Black-shouldered Kite
Red Kite
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Common Kestrel
Merlin
Red-legged Partridge
Moorhen
Purple Swamp Hen
Coot
Common Crane
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Snipe
Greenshank
Green Sandpiper

Common Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Feral Pigeon
Little Owl
Barn Owl
Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Calandra Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla lark
Woodlark
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Robin
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Fan-tailed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap
Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit(Heard)
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch (Heard)

Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
Common Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Red Avadavat
Common Waxbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Red Deer
Pipistrelle sp
Serotine

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Iberian Marsh Frog

BUTTERFLIES

Small White
Large White
Bath White
Western Dappled White
Small Copper
Red Admiral
Clouded Yellow