

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura Winter
26 Nov – 1 Dec 2013

Guide: Mark Denman

Guests: Janet & Colin Holter, Shelagh & Frank Mawby, Adrienne & Robin Mace and Ray Phillips

Day 1: After an early flight from Gatwick we arrive in a sunny but cool Madrid where we meet Frank and Shelagh who travelled yesterday from Manchester. After a quick bite to eat we're soon on our way, leaving the urban sprawl of Madrid for gentle rolling farmland. Buzzards, Kestrels and Red Kites are seen as we head southwest and a couple of Black Vultures are a nice surprise, along with a big kettle of White Storks that Ray points out. We have a quick leg stretch where we see a pair of Stonechats, Black Redstarts and Colin points out a Chiff-chaff.

We've got a bit of time before we're due at Vina las Torres so we have a brief stop at the reed beds of Arrocampo, a unique habitat in this part of the world. Several Marsh Harriers patrol the area and Colin points out our first Common Crane. Chiff-chaffs seem to be everywhere and we see a few White Wagtails on the road, all the while serenaded by a Cetti's Warbler that typically remains hidden in the reeds. Ray points out some Greylag Geese that pass overhead, and although we see both Moorhen and Coot, only Adrienne is lucky enough to glimpse a noisy Purple Swamp Hen. There are lots of Meadow Pipits and Corn Buntings in the surrounding fields and little groups of Goldfinches pass through but only Mark and Ray manage brief views of two Great Bitterns that appear very briefly at the edge of the reed beds.

Our main target here is Black-shouldered Kite and when we get a brief glimpse of one we walk back to the van to get a better view. We soon pick it up again, enjoying its unique, almost Nightjar-like flight and Kestrel like hovering. We try to move a little closer in the van but it doubles back on us, though we get nice scope views as it rests on various posts. Both Black and Griffon Vultures drift overhead and Frank points out a couple of wintering Skylarks.

As ever we have a lovely welcome at Vina las Torres and after settling into our rooms we meet for a welcome drink and the first of Belen's imaginative meals, before discussing our exciting plans for the next few days.

Day 2: The day dawns beautiful and after breakfast we have a scan from the front of the hotel, getting great views of Azure-winged Magpies, Spotless Starlings, Blackcap and Sardinian Warbler. Unfortunately Adrienne feels a little unwell, so we have a change of plan so that we can call back at the hotel at lunchtime to see if she wants to join us for the afternoon.

Our first stop is an area of mixed steppe and farmland that can be very good for Bustard and Sandgrouse. It's a little quiet at first but we get good views of Crested Larks that are singing happily away and Colin finds an Iberian Grey Shrike and a distant Great Bustard. Moving a short distance up the road we find a group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse amongst some sheep! The birds look absolutely gorgeous through the scopes, orange breasts glowing in the morning sunshine and we enjoy great views until a man with a dog flushes them. A group of Griffon Vultures pose in the trees behind us and we are further entertained by a big flock of Serin.

We see many Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Crested Larks as we drive a dirt track, but we're searching for much bigger game! Frank brilliantly picks out some Black-bellied Sandgrouse in a stony field, and on closer inspection we find many more of these cryptic denizens of this unique habitat. A big group of Great Bustards show really well on a nearby ridge, and while enjoying a coffee we get great prolonged views of these huge birds amidst the soundtrack of Pipits, Larks and the distinctive calls of both species of Sandgrouse.

On the way back to Vina las Torres we stop to look at a little group of larks feeding under some Holm Oaks, a good opportunity to practise our ID skills on the tricky pair of Thekla and Crested Larks. A Wryneck is a very nice surprise, but unfortunately a large lorry flushes it before we all manage to see it!

The good news back at the hotel is that Adrienne is feeling much better and will be joining us for the afternoon, so after a quick comfort stop we head out again across the Zorita Plains to a big reservoir, where we have lunch by the dam. Around twenty Ravens soar effortlessly above us and the huge area of water is peppered with thousands of duck, comprising largely of Shoveler, although we also manage to find Wigeon, Pintail, Gadwall and rather bizarrely two Avocets swimming in the middle of this melee of wildfowl. We see a few Great Crested Grebe, but much more pleasing is the Black-necked Grebe that pops up nearby. Common Buzzard and Red Kite are dwarfed by some Griffon Vultures that pass overhead and the sight and sound of hundreds of Common Cranes below us in the rice fields encourages us to take a closer look.

Driving into the flooded fields of Vegas Altas we see Cranes in every direction and experience one of the highlights of the holiday when we're surrounded by thousands of Spanish Sparrows in what more resembles an African scene. Tiny Red Avadavats tease us in roadside reed beds but they are temporarily forgotten when Robin points out a superb Black-shouldered Kite that patrols close to the van - brilliant! Countless numbers of birds surround us with Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets, gulls, Cranes and even more Sparrows, Waxbills and Avadavats.

We move to an area where the Cranes seem to be concentrating, getting brilliant views of a couple of Fan-tailed Warblers that pop up nearby. There are so many wonderful sights and sounds in this wonderful place with amazing numbers of

Cranes passing by, their evocative calls filling the air. We get better views of Avadavat when Adrienne spots one from the van and Colin thinks he sees a Bluethroat dive into the reeds, so we get out to investigate. Several Marsh Harriers pass nearby and with a bit of perseverance we actually find two Bluethroats, one of which shows very well as it feeds on the edge of the reed bed. Ray points out some White Storks in an adjoining field and other birds here include Tree Sparrow, more Waxbills and Avadavats and our first Hoopoe that lands on the track in front of us.

Leaving the area we pause to admire the Black-shouldered Kite that is now resting on roadside wires before heading to our final stop of the day. Back in the dry steppe grassland we soon find some Golden Plover amongst the hordes of Lapwing, and Colin finds a distant Little Owl, although our enjoyment of this is short lived when a farmer politely asks us to move on! From further down the road we find another Little Owl and a small party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, once more amongst some sheep! Big numbers of gulls pass overhead on their way to roost at the reservoir, and Starlings provide a memorable image to end the day as they pass in front of the setting sun - a great first full day!

Day 3: It's another beautiful day that we will be spending in the famous Monfrague reserve, and after breakfast we head north past Trujillo to this Mecca for birds of prey. Shelagh and Adrienne both see Hoopoes on the journey and there are high numbers of Common Buzzard that sit like sentinels on roadside posts. Pena Falcon is our first stop in this famous reserve, and true to its name Frank spots a Peregrine before we've got out of the van! Griffon Vultures soar overhead and we get fabulous scope views of a few birds that are late leaving the cliffs. It's not just big birds on show here though with lots of wintering Blackcaps in the scrub below, along with a very showy Short-toed Treecreeper that creeps not only on trees but nearby rock faces, a Grey Wagtail that Ray finds by the van, Serin, Linnet, Sardinian Warbler, a nice Hawfinch found by Colin and a brief Blue Rock Thrush spotted by Robin.

Moving on we've not gone far when a magnificent Bonelli's Eagle cruises past and we screech to a halt, jumping out of the vehicle in the hope of a better view. Two birds show very briefly on the near ridge, but tantalisingly fly behind the trees never to be seen again - a very good but frustratingly short view! Despite the sun it's rather chilly so we head to the nearby hamlet of Villarreal for some very nice coffee and rather interesting aniseed shortbread, before heading for our lunch spot overlooking a river. The water level is amazingly low and Colin and Jane can now see the bridge that was covered in water when they were here in April. Lots of Crag Martins whizz past while the Griffon Vultures come and go from their breeding cliffs. We find a distant male Blue Rock Thrush on a ridge the other side of the river and a couple of much closer Thekla Larks proving much easier to see.

Back in Villarreal we have a comfort stop and find some Crested Larks that we can now all ID with total confidence - well, almost! We have a brief stop

in an area that can be good for Hawfinches, and although we don't find any we get good views of hungry Azure-winged Magpies that search for scraps around the picnic tables.

At Portilla del Tietar we've not even parked when we spot a Spanish Imperial Eagle soaring amongst the Griffons! Getting out we can clearly see the shining white epaulettes that catch the sun when it turns, a fabulous view of what is now the rarest eagle in the world. Moving closer to the viewing area we pick the eagle up again high overhead, and a cheer goes up when we see it attack a hapless Griffon Vulture who might have a big size advantage but can't even remotely match the aggression of this magnificent aquilla, absolutely no doubt who the boss is here!

It's lovely watching the vultures come and go, and we finally get better views of a Blue Rock Thrush when a scaly female appears behind us. The eagle puts in another couple of brief appearances and we find some Red Deer that feed rather precariously on the steep slope in front of us. As the light begins to fade we see lots of Cormorants making their way up river and Crag Martins catching the last bugs of the day. Vultures wheeze noisily and Sardinian Warblers scold and rattle in the undergrowth, and with Venus shining brightly and the last embers of light fading away Greater Horseshoe Bats begin to emerge, but sadly the much hoped for Eagle Owl eludes us.

Travelling back to Trujillo Shelagh spots a mystery mammal that sadly remains just that but we enjoy a nice meal in the medieval town before returning to the hotel where we turn the scope on Jupiter and its perfectly aligned four moons.

Day 4: Without a cloud in the sky and the wind having now dropped we can't wait to get out after breakfast on the next leg of our Extremaduran adventure! We head back towards the Santa Marta de Megasca steppes where we're hoping to catch up with Little Bustard. As we approach our first stop a few Red-legged Partridges scurry past the van and it's lovely to finally feel some warm Spanish sunshine! There are several wintering Buzzards sitting around and a group of Griffon Vultures on the horizon, along with the usual suspects like Serin, Crested Lark and Iberian Grey Shrike. Much more unusual in this arid environment is the Kingfisher that shoots past obviously rather out of place, and with a bit of work we finally manage to find a couple of Little Bustards in the long grass, eventually finding seven of these charismatic birds. We can hear the gull-like calls of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse up the road so we set off in pursuit, but alas they seem to have departed by the time we're scanning, although three fly-past Great Bustards are some compensation.

Moving on we see big flocks of Serin by the sides of the road, their yellow rumps gleaming as they fly away, and we once more head up a dirt track in the hope of re-locating the Sandgrouse. Getting out of the vehicle we immediately see two Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying past, getting great views and enjoying their bubbling calls. We actually manage to find quite a few Sandgrouse of both

species, and although the light isn't great we manage to sneak up on some birds that look great through the scopes.

After a fuel and comfort stop (along with an adventure for Ray's passport) we have our lunch by a river where Adrienne points out a Common Snipe. Its delightful sitting amongst the oaks but our relaxing lunch is rudely interrupted by a surprise pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, although I don't think anyone minds really! As we walk through the dehesa along the river we flush Green Sandpipers, Grey and White Wagtails along with a Kingfisher that pauses long enough for some of us to see in the scope, and as we approach the little lake hundreds of Common Cranes take to the air, obviously still a little nervous having recently arrived. At least ten Great Egrets are here and we add Pochard and Teal to our list along with Gadwall, Shoveler, Pintail and Little Grebes. There are very few waders here, but Colin does point out a Green Sandpiper, and Frank does well to pick out a very distant Greenshank. A brief Merlin is seen by some of us before we head back to the van, once more seeing Wagtails and Sandpipers as we go.

Driving to our next stop we find a most obliging Little Owl that poses for some photos on the edge of a small town before we enjoy a coffee and cake near a vulture feeding station. It's an amazing spectacle as dozens and dozens of Griffons along with a few Black Vultures squabble over a few scraps and we can't help but notice how clumsy they look on the ground compared to their majestic performances in the air. Driving along the rough road we see huge numbers of Spanish Sparrows, Corn Buntings and Skylarks, along with a few Common Kestrels and yet another Little Owl that Adrienne points out.

We take a smaller track near the town of Belen to look for Bustards and haven't travelled far when sharp-eyed Frank spots some Great Bustards in a nearby field. They really are quite close and look superb in the soft afternoon light, and there is great excitement when Colin picks up on a distant flock of twenty Little Bustards flying towards us. We watch them for around ten minutes before they decide to land in the same field as the Great Bustards, allowing us a brilliant opportunity to compare these most prized species. Amazingly then another group of Little Bustards land right amongst the Great Bustards, but they don't linger for too long, taking to the air and encouraging the original group of Little Bustards with them. We then watch as Little Bustards seem to appear from all directions, eventually resulting in a big flock of 163 birds (Frank counted them!) that turn this way and that looking stunning in light that just could not be more perfect. They eventually land further away in longer vegetation so we turn our attention back to the Great Bustards that have now been joined by another group that have just flown in. Calandra Larks show well here and Ray spots a Fox that is making its way towards the Great Bustards, although the birds seem rather unimpressed and the Fox when it gets a bit closer obviously thinks it may have bitten off more than it can chew!!

It's been an amazing day and we very reluctantly drag ourselves away from this magical place, returning to the hotel for our first wine tasting, another of Belen's lovely meals and an offering of Bach and Liszt from Marina - perfect!

Day 5: It's our final full day here and once again we're blessed with perfect weather. We're heading back to the main wintering grounds of the Cranes again, but stop off briefly to check the Campo Lugar road for Bustards and Sandgrouse. Unfortunately, being a Saturday there are a few hunters in the area and we soon realise that most birds, if they have any sense will be elsewhere! Instead we head for the rice fields and soon start seeing Common Cranes and Lapwing. Little parties of Avadavats and Waxbills flit along the edges of the road along with bigger numbers of Spanish Sparrow. Frank spots two Hoopoes sunning themselves on the top of a roof and we also see several Green Sandpipers in flight. Stopping to scan some flooded fields we see loads of Common Snipe along with a single Avocet and several Greenshank. A Kingfisher lands really close but is off again when it sees us and we also find Curlew, Black-winged Stilt and a couple of Spotted Redshank here.

We go for a little walk and manage to get a nice 'Red' Red Avadavat in the scopes along with a few Little Ringed Plovers before finding a flooded field that is just covered in waders. There are lots of Stilts here and Colin does very well to find a single Ruff amongst them. Some of us finally manage to see a Cetti's Warbler here before our attention turns back to the waders. It would almost be impossible to count the Snipe here but we do count around 100 Dunlin and are very pleased to find a few Kentish Plover amongst them. We then head back across the Campo Lugar road where the hunters are sadly still in evidence before visiting a little bar where a coffee and cake, not to mention loo are most welcome!

Lunch by a little river in the warm sunshine is very pleasant and we see another Cetti's Warbler, along with Long-tailed Tits, but pride of place has to go to the Black-shouldered Kite that Robin spots on a really close post that treats us to fantastic views of a bird that sometimes can be very hard to see. For our final session we head back to the rice fields of Vegas Altas and once more are surrounded by Cranes, Egrets and those big flocks of Spanish Sparrows. We head back to the Bluethroat site and this time manage good views of both birds including the one with the blue throat!! A couple of surprise Dartford Warblers show very well in the scopes and are particularly enjoyed by Frank. Marsh Harriers are still very much in evidence and Colin does really well to pick out a ring-tailed Hen Harrier, our only Hen Harrier of the week but sadly it proves very elusive with only Robin managing to see it as well. A Merlin sits briefly on a distant ridge and we get nice views of a rather closer Fan-tailed Warbler, but the best is saved for last when all of a sudden thousands of Cranes take to the air and pass both overhead, and everywhere you look, a fantastic and magical sight and sound to bring the day to a close.

Heading back to the main road we pass incredible numbers of birds that spend the winter months here and reflect on what has been another truly memorable day in Extremadura, and after our final wine tasting and dinner together we settle down by the lovely open fire and go through our final checklist and holiday highlights.

Species of the trip had votes for Black-winged Stilt, Dartford Warbler, Spanish Sparrow and Cranes, along with two votes for Little Bustard and Black-shouldered Kite.

Place of the trip was divided between two places - Vina Las Torres, and perhaps not surprisingly after the amazing Little Bustard show, Belen Plains.

Magic moments were plentiful on this holiday, but votes in the end went to close Kingfisher, huge Sparrow flocks, two votes for the magnificent spectacle of all those Cranes and four votes for the Little Bustard show.

Day 6: We have a little time on our return journey to look for Golden Eagle that sadly doesn't put in an appearance, but it can't detract from what has been another terrific trip to this wonderful place. As ever, a huge thank you to Juan-Pedro, Belen and family for making us so welcome at their beautiful little hotel, and a big thank you to the group for all the fun and really top notch spotting!! Hope to see you all again very soon.
Mark.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Cormorant
Great Bittern
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
White Stork
Greylag Goose
Gadwall!!
Wigeon
Mallard
Pintail
Shoveler
Pochard
Teal
Tufted Duck
Black-shouldered Kite
Red Kite
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Buzzard
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Common Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Moorhen
Purple Gallinule
Coot
Water Rail (Heard)
Common Crane
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Ruff
Avocet
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Lapwing
Snipe
Curlew
Greenshank
Spotted Redshank
Common Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Dunlin
Black-headed Gull

Yellow-legged Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Little Owl
Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Wryneck
Skylark
Calandra Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Robin
Bluethroat
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Fan-tailed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap
Chiffchaff
Firecrest (Heard)
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow
Raven
Spotless Starling
Common Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Red Avadavat
Common Waxbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch

Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Corn Bunting.

MAMMALS

Brown Hare
Rabbit
Red Deer
Red Fox
Greater Horseshoe Bat
Mouse sp.

OTHER STUFF

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Small White
Small Heath
Red Admiral
Small Copper
Venus
Jupiter