

Holiday Highlights

Extremadura

4 – 11 April 2015

Guides: Mark Denman and Duncan Macdonald

Guests: Christine and John Sawyer, Chris and Andrew Mortimer, Marilyn Davidson, Irene and Barry Shaw, Elma Macdonald, Penny Player and Kathleen Tuck

Day 1 We all meet up nice and early at Gatwick to catch our flight to Madrid. Being the day before Easter most of the world is also departing from Gatwick. It is not long before we are on the plane though and heading off to sunnier climes than the dreich of London. The view of the Pyrenees as we fly over, still laden with snow, is spectacular for those of us close to a window.

Leaving everyone to have a bite to eat Mark and Duncan have a little difficulty in getting the vans and we are all soon loading luggage, getting binoculars out and soon heading out of Madrid.

We make a comfort stop along the motorway from where we get our first views of Cattle Egret along with Spanish Sparrows in a bush, Barn Swallows around us, White Wagtail and Crested Larks in the car park. A very large cricket/locust makes an appearance but proves too agile to be caught.

Mark has a stop arranged for us at the wetlands of Arrocampo near the nuclear power station of Almaraz. We pull up and get out into the heat of the day. We can hear Savi's Warblers reeling from the reed beds and Zitting Cisticolas all over. A Swallowtail Butterfly wings past us, White Storks are soaring and the smell of dead badger is awful!

We look for the Savi's in the reeds and get fleeting glimpses as we try and get them in the scopes. Whilst looking we find our first Marsh Harriers, including a food pass between the sexes, Little and Cattle Egrets and some superb views of Purple Herons. Purple Herons are squealing from the reeds but also very obliging by walking out into the open for great views. Big purple chickens!

Elma has found a bird on a pylon that Duncan dismisses as a magpie but is actually our first Iberian Shrike (Southern Grey Shrike). There is a Short-toed Eagle gaining height over by a large tower and a Black Kite, perched low on a pylon and calling. Griffon Vultures are obvious in the near distance when our first opportunity arrives to go through vulture id when a Black Vulture comes overhead giving us astounding views.

The world's largest concentration of this rare bird is here in Extremadura. A distant Great White Egret makes a fleeting appearance when a Gull-billed Tern wings its way in and we get decent views of this large marsh tern. Before we leave we also find other

butterfly species like Scarce Swallowtail and Small Copper as well as another great find by Elma - a Red-striped Oil Beetle.

It is not far to our base for the duration of the holiday, the beautiful Hotel Vina Las Torres and our wonderful hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. The Judas tree at the front of the hotel is simply dripping colour and the views out over to Trujillo are fabulous. There are Azure-winged Magpies and Hoopoe calling as we unload the vans and a Black Redstart serenading us from the top of the tower as we are shown to our sumptuous accommodation.

We are treated to a fabulous meal from Belen with wine chosen and described by Juan Pedro before heading for bed with anticipation keen for the coming days.

Day 2

The day dawns clear and bright, with little opportunity to get out before breakfast as the sun doesn't rise early enough! There are some bleary eyes around the table over breakfast. The day before had been a long one and some of us had not slept well as a result. Fortified with good coffee and chocolate spread we gather at the vans to have a look around. There are Spotless Starlings on wires and rooftops. Azure-winged Magpies are a constant around us as is the sound of Hoopoe. We get brief views of one on a pylon before it flies off to the top of a tree. Distant kites are beginning to get up as are the larger Griffons.

Once the vans are all loaded we head off in the direction of Delietosa. We stop along the road beneath a rocky ridge and scan around. Mark finds us a Thekla Lark on a fence and we go through the id features that separate these from Crested Lark. A Hoopoe flies past beneath us when we hear Dartford Warbler calling. We are then rewarded with astounding views of this smart Sylvia Warbler as it sings from the top of a bush and stays there! We get it in the scopes and even see the white spots on the throat as it sings.

We find an Iberian Shrike on top of another bush beneath us and a Black Vultures soars over head showing the distinctive wing shape, so different to a Griffon Vulture. We hear Woodlark singing but cannot locate it. We drive further along the road and Mark spots a Montague's Harrier ahead of his van. It is strange habitat to find this graceful raptor so it must be a bird that is moving through, still on migration. There are actually two of them as Andy spots another behind us.

We stop at a bridge over the Rio Berzocana with the ridge above us and some towering crags around which is a swarm of Crag Martins. The sky is blue, the sun is hot and the views and landscape spectacular. We decide to have tea here and open up the nibbles that the hotel so generously provided. While that procedure is happening the birding continues. Mark finds a Blue Rock Thrush perched above us, giving us the typical shape, all pointy at the front, there is a stunning Short-toed Eagle cruising along the ridge line and which stays in view for the entirety of our stop. A Cirl Bunting is singing and we manage to locate it on the top of a tree on the far bank and some of us manage scope views of this increasingly tricky bunting. We manage to catch up with some more familiar species here like Goldfinch, Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Wren, but experiencing them with Griffon Vultures soaring overhead is quite different!

As singing Blackcap serenades us and Cetti's Warbler bursts into song a Spanish Festoon is found. What an amazing mixture of patterns and colour this butterfly is, all angles and zig-zags. There is a Small Heath on the wing also. Before packing up Elma finds a strange moth patrolling an area of rocky scrub. It hovers very well and is chasing all other insects out of its "patch". It is a Broad-bordered Bee Hawkmoth and we are fascinated with the behaviour of the insect and the fact that we can't see its wings move they are moving so fast.

We pack up and move just around the corner to the hill-top village of Cabanas del Castillo. Parking is at a premium but with a bit of jiggery-pokery we squeeze the vans in and head out up through the village. There are a lot of people around and they are quite happy to be making a lot of noise, but we smile and continue up towards a viewpoint atop the ridge. Just before the rocky step a few of us are rewarded with looking down on an Egyptian Vulture being chased by a Griffon Vulture. Once the rock step has been negotiated we walk out onto an area of grass below crags and with the view across the valley to the Sierra de Viejas before us. It takes the breath away. This is Mark's favourite view, understandably. There are one or two Griffons around and we all get views looking down on them. Alpine Swifts are tearing around like little jet fighters, so close we barely need binoculars. The yickering flight call we hear only briefly, despite the guides' best efforts in mimickery! A Blue Rock Thrush is serenading us from above and we get great views of this "blue" thrush. He even song-flights for us. A Black Redstart makes a smart appearance. Mark hears Rock Bunting and is diligently seeking it out when it is spied below us on a rock. It is close enough to get great views through the binoculars, with a humbug head and smart chestnut plumage this is a very smart bird. Marilyn spots a distant raptor that is not a vulture, so we get onto it and watch. It is a Short-toed Eagle and a great spot from here. The Rock Bunting reappears and is considerably closer, in fact it is now on the rock right next to us! Wow! It is almost impossible to get the whole bird in the field of view. A fabulous way to round off our visit and as the bird flies we also carefully renegotiate the rock step and return to the vehicles and drive a short distance for lunch.

It is baking hot when we pull up for lunch and are glad of the limited shade a large Cork Oak provides us. The Hawthorn next to it is spectacularly in blossom. We tear enthusiastically into our bocadillos as Griffon Vultures soar over head and are joined by a Black Vulture. Again we get fantastic views to compare the two and lodge the id features. Mark hears a Nuthatch calling from across the road and with a judicious use of playback we watch as the bird fly's up onto a dead branch and calls. Great views are had by all. Andy finds a very smart male Sardinian Warbler in a nearby bush and again we get great views. What an eye the Sardinian Warbler has. We hear Raven and Subalpine Warbler also.

Spain is justly famous for its vultures and Mark leads us onto a spot where hundreds can congregate at a food dump by a sausage factory, but when we arrive there are no vultures to be seen! Mark is horrified as this has never happened before. However all is not lost as birds are seen descending behind us into some fields. There is a handy track heading in that direction so we take it to see what we can find. It becomes apparent that this is where the vultures are and we see numerous birds low over fields.

The track leads to another factory and as we ease past we become aware of lots of vultures on a carcass. As both vans cruise to a halt the birds spook and take flight which is a pity but what a view of these gigantic birds taking to the air. We move on past to a bend where we get out for a better look. Some birds have remained and are tucking in to the pig that has been left out. It is not for the faint hearted. The pig jerks and jumps as if alive as the vultures' heads disappear inside. The vultures that took off are above us now and those that remain are mainly Griffons but also a Black on the ground. We get to see the impressive size difference between the two; the Black Vulture being a head taller and considerably bulkier.

A pale phased Booted Eagle is up with the vultures and we get fantastic views of this Buzzard-sized eagle. Calandra Larks are obvious by their calls and we hear Bee-eaters and get fleeting views as a flock moves through. Back at the carcass one griffon is now going in down the ear, ouch!

The landscape is now one of vast vistas with distant snow-topped mountains. We are crossing endless plains, grazing lands that stretch to the horizon heading towards Belen. There are Corn Buntings and Crested Larks on the fences almost every 10 metres providing the aural backdrop to our experience. Mark's van stops at a small pond where they find a Little Grebe and some Stripe-necked Terrapins. There are more of these reptiles at the next pond too as well as another Little Grebe, a Grey Heron and a couple of waders fly in. It is a Little Ringed Plover and a Green Sandpiper. The other van reverses to have a look but the Green Sandpiper has flown off before they arrive. Chris and Andy at the back of the van spot six Iberian Hares in a field just as Mark is radioing to say there are Bee-eaters around. At a small gully there are Bee-eaters sitting on the roadside fence. They are like flying rainbows and the views are stunning. They don't like being photographed all that much and are soon on their way.

The radio soon cranks into life again as two birds are seen winging over the track ahead, they are Great Bustards. We stop for a look. We have taken a sandy side track to get a look at some more habitat and we are soon looking at what has to be one of the most ridiculous bird displays in the world. There are more Great Bustards in view on the ground and some of the males are displaying. They seem to turn themselves completely inside out! Through the telescope it is difficult to tell which end is which; they are just a mass of white fluff. The females, in general, seem completely non-plussed. Some males are strutting around showing off their extraordinary whiskers when Chris finds a male Little Bustard. We now have the two to compare. The Little Bustard has his black and white throat feathers engorged and is very handsome. We count at least 15 Great Bustards in view and also spot both Griffon and Black Vultures on the ground, eating something unidentifiable. Four Ravens fly by and a Montagues Harrier starts to display before we have to drag ourselves away from this remarkable place.

After another stunning meal with wine at Vina Las Torres, with Maria performing beautifully on the piano as we ate, we head out again to a nearby convent for the chance of some owls. The owl in particular that we seek is the diminutive, migratory Scops Owl and we have heard that the area around the convent can be good. We are armed with a speaker and Mark's remarkable new torch. As soon as we are out of the vans we hear Scops Owl calling. We walk a little way up a road and listen. There are

at least two owls calling, but even with the torch they prove difficult to find. We hear Tawny Owl in the distance and there is the regular hooting of Long-eared Owl whilst we continue the search. Eventually we give up. We have had only the briefest of flight views and it is getting late.

Back at the Hotel we are in for a surprise as there on the wall is Europe's largest moth, the Giant Peacock Moth. This remarkable insect with a wingspan the size of an adult hand is just sitting on the wall. It has large "eyes" in the wings, hence the name and it looks heavy enough to bring the wall down. Cameras are bursting with the prize. And then it is time for bed.

Day 3

Today is wet and overcast when we emerge for breakfast, although the Nightingale in the garden is undeterred by this change in climatic fortune. Where is it we are heading today?.....Over there, in the thick black cloud. We fix a smile on our faces, pack the waterproofs and head off.

We stop in Trujillo to re-fuel the vans. We then park by the bullring and get out to have a look for Lesser Kestrel, for which the bullring is famous. There is a male perched on the roof so we get him in the scopes. What a beauty! Zoomed in we can see every detail on him; including his pale talons (Common Kestrels have black talons). His peachy underparts and clean, grey head are most obvious. He takes umbrage at a noisy lorry in the car park and flies off giving us good views of the pale underside of Lesser Kestrels. We turn our attention to the very smart Spotless Starlings on the roof. House Martins and Pallid Swifts are wheeling above us. We get our first chance to go through Pallid and Common Swift identification.

Heading west out of Trujillo we stop at a small pond on the outskirts where there are Grey Herons, Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpiper all viewable. A man is walking towards us with a dog and mumbling as he goes. Though he is smiling the mumbling is interpreted as "you can't park here!" He mumbles on his way and we take the hint.

Heading out into the plains to the west of Trujillo we stop at "Happening Corner" where we get the vans off the road and scan about. Christine is quick off the mark with a very smart, very close Iberian Grey Shrike (Southern Grey Shrike) sitting on top of a fence. We watch as it perch hunts and relocates to a bush. There underparts look as though the paint has run in the rain. Suddenly there is the shout "Great Bustard!" We get great flight views of these elegant giants; Roe Deer with wings as they have been described. Penny spots a lark on the fence opposite us. It is clear from the bill that it is a Thekla Lark. And talking of larks, what a soundscape there is here; Thekla Lark, Crested Lark, Calandra Lark and Corn Buntings all going for it and providing a suitable score to the views in front of us.

We are heading deep into the Santa Magasca plains on the hunt for sandgrouse and bustards. The tracks are quite rough and we are scanning constantly. Calandra Larks perch up close to the track giving us great views. There is a field with Griffon Vultures standing on the fence posts as well as on the ground and in the surrounding trees, but on fence posts? Another Black Vulture is on the ground with

them. We are getting superb views of this incredibly rare vulture. The rain has decided to show itself properly so we head into the village of Santa Marta. Parking in the square, with its orange trees, we find a little cafe and take it over. Drying out and warming up with our cafe con leche we are serenaded by the caged Red-fronted Serin which sends some back outside. We also get Pin-tailed Sandgrouse! But it is stuffed and rather worn looking.

Suitably fortified and with the rain easing we carry on and stop at a bridge over the Rio Magasca. We are in a river gorge here with dehesa around us. Mark informs us that we are within a Golden Eagle territory here so it is worth a look. How strange the habitat is for Golden Eagle, they must be tree nesting more like Imperial. The weather improves and warms as we eat our lunch although the sky is devoid of raptors.

A Cirl Bunting is singing and we manage to locate him giving us spectacular scope views. Irene, Penny, Barry have found Crag Martins landing on the rock sitting by the road, a Serin sits up nicely. We take a short walk across the bridge and down to the river on the other side. The vegetation is wet so we don't linger too long although we nearly trip over an Iberian Frog that Andy disturbs.

We travel on with the weather improving and warming all the time. We slow at a junction and turn right. A Montagu's Harrier is on the wing just ahead of us when Mark radios that we are stopping. There are more Montagu's Harriers obvious and Marks van has had them standing on the road in front of them. This is Monty Junction and we soon realise why. They are everywhere. The sky seems to be alive with these graceful harriers. The males are sky dancing; swooping up and plummeting back down again, wheeling and twisting and making us quite giddy watching them. There is a pair that keeps coming back to a spot not far to our right coming down behind some tamarisks. The grey males are a truly beautiful bird especially their rusty flanks and underwings, females are slightly larger, brown birds but stunning none the less. They are landing on the road again and on fence posts so that we get them in the scopes again and again. It is a life affirming experience and maybe unique with the number of birds involved.

Chris finds a Little Bustard in the field opposite and we enjoy his raspberry blowing and realise he is getting a response! There are two males. One starts chasing the other and we get both birds in flight and on the ground. All the while the Montys are still performing above us, behind us everywhere. This may be place of the trip for us if not the magic moment. Standing sentinel on some rocks in the far field with the sheep are a couple of Black Vultures. We can see them with the naked eye as they are bigger than the sheep! There are Calandra Larks singing all the while. We could stay here forever, but time is inexorable.

Dragging ourselves away from Monty Junction we retrace our steps to the bridge over the Rio Magasca, deep in Goldie territory. There are lot more birds in the sky as we pull in and as we are disembarking Mark shouts that he has found a Golden Eagle. Fantastic! Sure enough, up there with the numerous Griffons there is a slightly smaller bird, the eagle. The silhouette is unmistakable with the wings held in a slight V and the long tail and bulging hind wing. It is a lot higher than the Griffons. The Golden Eagles in Spain are of a separate race to those back home, slightly smaller and darker but really it looks like a Golden Eagle to us. The race is 'homeyeri' for those who are collecting! The

bird starts to go into a glide and before long it has gone behind the hill.

Time to head home so as we are getting back into the vans....time for one last look? Of course! There is another bird up there with the Griffons now, a Bonelli's Eagle! Everyone jumps back out and starts to follow directions onto it. Again it is high but the straight tail; flat wings and pale underside with dark wing bar are all visible - Two difficult eagles to find in the same place, what a raptor-tastic day.

Day 4 It has poured down overnight and even Bernard the cat is concerned, although still as friendly as ever. Breakfast done, lunches and flasks packed we load up and head north to the world famous Monfrague National Park. Birdlife International has designated 75% of Extremadura as International Bird Areas (IBA) and Monfrague is the jewel in the crown.

We arrive at the most impressive Pena Falcon, a huge cliff rearing up out of the River Tajo. The weather has cleared and the sun is out but it is cold here. The rearing cliff opposite us is bedecked with Griffon Vultures as are the crags up behind us all waiting for the sun to strengthen so that they can get lift. Some are flying around and we get to look down on them as well as one or two at eye level, wow! There is good parking here and a covered viewing area. There are more people here than we have seen all week so far, but it is easy to see why. Griffon Vultures and Black Kites are giving us great views, Penny finds a Cormorant winging by, John says is that a Cirl Bunting? And there below us is a cracking male singing, so we get our scopes on him and these views are better than yesterday unbelievably. Mark can hear Rock Bunting but it is not playing. A very close immature Blue Rock Thrush entertains us for a while. We spot a Black Stork soaring above the cliff. It slowly descends giving us superb views looking down on it before it lands just above the water and starts to call. A strange piercing whistle from such a large bird. We get great views of this very rare breeder and see that it is not black at all but green and black and white with red legs and beak. A man from another group sidles up and tells us where the nest is. Low down on a ledge on a rocky island in the river is a large bundle of sticks with a sleeping Black Stork on it. Thank you and what a great view.

We are feeling the cold and so we move on a bit to a bridge over the river Tajo for tea. The River Tajo (Tejo in Portugal) is the longest river in Iberia, 650 miles in total. It rises in Aragon in the east of Spain, drains into the Atlantic near Lisbon, Portugal and forms the border between the two countries for about 30 miles.

Here at the bridge over the Tajo we get some warm coffee down us and enjoy walking onto the bridge where despite the wind we are treated to a fantastic aerial display by countless House Martins, the occasional Sand Martin, Crag Martins and the masters of the skies the Alpine Swift. They are chasing back and forth at head height, under the bridge and all around. The wind is cold but these fantastic birds keep our minds off that. Two Black Vultures come low overhead, they are simply huge, and float around, flap a bit and are gone. Another raptor appears over the ridge behind where we have parked the vans, it is an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle showing off its' dulux white epaulettes as it banks around. It quickly goes into glide mode and is gone from view. As we retrace our steps back to the vans we stop and have a look underneath the bridge at the

hundreds of House Martin nests that are there. Incredible; a whole colony in a line.

We stop at the little village of Villareal de San Carlos to use their facilities and to arrange for dinner that evening. Mark has told us that this can be a good spot for Hawfinch, but with the wind blowing as it is they are unlikely to be in the tops of the trees. The facilities for tourists are excellent here so we have a little time whilst dinner is arranged and ordered. Whilst we are down by the loos Barry spots a Hawfinch low down in a Hawthorn, great spotting! Not all of us get onto it though before it flies off. There is a Short-toed Eagle in the air, Linnets are trilling about, Serin is singing and there are the ubiquitous Corn Buntings.

We carry on through the stunning Monfrague landscape of water and oak-clad hillside to have lunch at a picnic site near the edge of the river Tajo. Again there are excellent facilities. The sun is warm but there is still a stiff breeze. Once the bocadillos are distributed people are content to eat and scan or eat and walk around. A warbler is heard faintly and is confirmed as a Western Orphean Warbler or "hurdy-gurdy bird" due to the sound of the song, but we cannot tempt it closer. The wind is in the wrong direction. Chris finds a lizard amongst the rocks. It is lovely with a red base to the tail and hind legs and a wonderful stripe on the face. It is a Spanish Psamadromus; great stuff.

Continuing along the river we make a brief stop at another Hawfinch site with good parking and picnic facilities. This overlooks a large cliff on the opposite bank with nesting Griffon Vultures and a better view of an Egyptian Vulture. There is a Red Deer hind visible on the far bank as we move on to cross the river once more.

We drop down along the river to Potilla del Tiatar where there is a viewpoint overlooking some crags on the opposite bank. We are out of the wind here and the sun is gloriously warm. We get ourselves together to walk a short distance to the watch point, Andy and Duncan bringing up the rear. A Subalpine Warbler treats them to a rare display, just feet away, unfortunately the rest of the group are well ahead. At the mirador we set up in the warm sunshine. There is a Peregrine chasing a Crag Martin in front of the main cliff and a Short-toed Eagle appears above the ridge, head into the wind and showing remarkable flying skills. There is a lady here that is a Speyside Wildlife guest and she informs us that there is a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles in residence and both birds have been showing well. It is not long before Mark spots an eagle approaching the cliff from the right. We all get onto the bird. It is a young Spanish Imperial, but something is not quite right. Rather than being the buffy/orange of most young Spanish Imperials, this bird is almost white where it should be orange! It is looking more like a young Tawny Eagle. What a strange colour or lack of. This youngster drops down onto a nest in the top of an oak, also strange. There is no way that an adult pair would tolerate this bird on their nest. We watch it come up again and again and provide us with great views. There is a Blue Rock Thrush singing from the hillside behind us, the Vultures are constantly toing and froing. Barry and Irene have had fleeting glimpses of a bird which turns out to be a fabulous Rock Bunting. This pleases Kathleen no end as she had missed the previous birds.

There is a group of other birders and photographers further down the road and we are

not happy that the nest we can see is the active one. A quick sortie to the other group confirms this. The active nest is only viewable from where this other group are. Through the scopes we get fabulous views of the adult female eagle, with her straw-coloured nape sitting on the nest. What a wonderful experience we have over the next hour or so with vultures above, Spanish Imperial on her nest and occasionally standing up, Short-toed Eagle giving a flying master class and Rock Buntings and Subalpine Warblers provide us entertainment closer.

We have an appointment with dinner back at Villareal de San Carlos so we tear ourselves away and head on back down the road. We pass the Red Deer hind again and arrive at Villareal. We go straight in for dinner which is plentiful and hearty and once we have purchased quite smart posters of the raptors of Spain we get back in the vans to return to Portilla del Tiatar to look and listen for Eagle Owl. On the way we get very good views of a Red Fox that is sitting expectantly by a roadside bin!

We set up again at the mirador and return to watching the Imperial Eagle on her nest. There is a barking noise and we watch as the male comes in making the strange noise and fly's through high over our heads. The female continues to sit tight. Our reason for returning here is to try for Eagle Owl. So far, this year, no one has managed to track down the nest site and views of owls have been sporadic so we are not hugely hopeful. There is a young Spanish couple at the mirador and the man informs us that his girlfriend, on her first birding experience, has just found an Eagle Owl! We follow his directions and sure enough, there on a rock is a stunning Eagle Owl in full daylight. We train the scopes on it and the views are spectacular. It is looking around and then closes its eyes, looking around a bit more without, the master of the area. We in turn get other birders on to it before, as the light is dimming, it flies across the face of the cliff, wow what a huge owl and lands further up and starts to call! We try to relocate it in the scopes but the light is fading and we have all had spectacular views, so with the bird calling we walk back to the vans with huge smiles on our faces and take the drive back to the hotel.

Day 5

The day is overcast and grey. There has been rain overnight and it is a bit drizzly this morning. Once breakfast is complete we start the loading process. It is lovely to take in the surroundings from the front of the hotel and we spend some time looking and listening. Hoopoes are calling as is a Cuckoo. Mark is looking under stones and finds us a morbidly fascinating Yellow Scorpion. Under another we find a smart Natterjack Toad that had been quite vocal last night.

Our plan today is to have another look at the Magasca steppes to look for sandgrouse so we head off through Trujillo, spotting Lesser Kestrels on the way. We are soon out on the steppe and it is cold and grey. There are a couple of Black Vultures on the ground along with Griffons sitting on rocks. We stop at various intervals to look and scan for sandgrouse, but they are frustratingly absent. We do hear Black-bellied Sandgrouse at one point but we do not see them flying. We get brief and again frustrating views of a small flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse but they land just out of site at the top of the hill. We follow them up to try and get views of them on the ground but we cannot find them. There are Great Bustards in the fields on both sides of the track and we get flight views of Little Bustard. Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings are everywhere, but not the views of sandgrouse we have been hoping for.

We relocate to the Rio Tozo where we have lunch, before going for a walk. The bocadillos put some fuel in our tanks and warm and then we set off following the rio towards a small lake. We enter a field with scattered trees and hear a Bonelli's Warbler singing from one. We try to locate it and tempt it out with a bit of playback but with no luck. A Marsh Harrier is spotted as we meander towards the lake. On a broom bush on the other side of the river a Common Redstart is singing but vanishes as we put the scope on it. A dark Booted Eagle flies through.

Mark gets us to approach the lake carefully as a Green Woodpecker flies up from the floor but not everyone sees it. We scan from a distance through the trees to the lake where there is an island in the middle and a reedy margin on the left. Mark is very quickly onto a group of five Spoonbills that are feeding amongst the reedy margin and then directs us to a Green Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover where the river trickles into the lake. Nice start.

There are Black-winged Stilts on and around the island. Briefly we get Great White, Little and Cattle Egrets all in the same scope view which is a nice opportunity to compare them. There is Gadwall out on the lake along with Shoveler, Mallard and eventually a couple of Teal. Grey Herons on the shore complete the heron/egret mix. White Storks are at the back of lake and we get a couple flying. Swifts and Hirundines are hawking low through the trees and over the lake as the weather is holding them down. There are Common and Pallid Swift seen, House Martins, Barn Swallows and Red-rumped Swallows buzz around our heads. John and Christine get another view of a Green Woodpecker but only briefly. Green Woodpeckers here in Spain are of the 'sharpei' race that lacks black around the eye. There is a Spotted Redshank wading around the island and a couple of Greenshank around the lake. Common Sandpiper is seen. There are a couple of Egyptian Geese at the back of the lake as the birds just seem to keep coming. Suddenly, having scanned the shores of the lake thoroughly for the whole time we have been here, there are two Common Cranes at the back of the lake! Nobody saw them fly in, but it is nice to see them. In the Autumn/Winter tens of thousands of cranes come in from northern Europe and spend the winter in the mild climate of Extremadura, so it is a bonus that these two are still here.

We retrace our steps, happy with the haul, back to the vans and head back to Vina Las Torres slightly early so that we can change as we are heading into Trujillo for dinner.

Trujillo is an ancient town, there being a settlement here from around the sixth century BC. It is famous for being the area of Spain from which South America was conquered. The Conquistadors left Trujillo in the 16th century and brought back Inca gold. The main Town square is delightful with large medieval houses and churches surrounding the square where there is a large statue of a conquistador on his horse. We set a time to convene for dinner and then split up to explore the town. The castle at the top of the hill attracts a lot of us and there are Pallid Swifts belting around with Spotless Starlings serenading from the battlements. The castle dates back to the 9th Century. There are White Storks nesting on just about every available bit of roof space across the town and from the castle Vina las Torres is visible, just. Dinner is served in a wonderful restaurant

in a building dating back to the 16th century but we are warmed by it and contented after our meal we head for home.

Day 6

Oh what a day! It is pouring with rain and bitterly cold when we emerge from sleep. Even Bernard the cat is noticeable by her absence. It is a dash across to the dining room trying to stay dry. We try and extend breakfast for as long as possible to try and let the rain stop. As we are loading the vans the rain has eased a bit and Juan Pedro is confident that we won't see rain all day. We hope he is right!

We head south from the hotel and aim for the Embalse de Santa Brava. This large body of water is visible from the left and we find a couple of Great Crested Grebes on the water as we look through the murk. There is a cry of "Great Spotted Cuckoo" from the front van and we all screech to a halt. The bird has flown past the front van so we quickly jump out and start scanning to relocate it. We find it atop a small hill below our viewpoint and it is with another! Through the scopes we see clearly the capped appearance of this large cuckoo that parasitises magpies. They fly off and one relocates on a distant wire. The views are now a bit distant. We move on just a few hundred metres when a male Black-eared Wheatear pops up on the fence to our right. There is a bit of pandemonium as we try to get a view of this bird. Mark's van are all getting out to look, but it has flown behind us. We only get frustrating views of this handsome bird. We do find Northern Wheatear and a couple of Hoopoes though. Back at the embalse there is a Lesser Black-backed Gull on the shore.

The rain is tipping down as we move onto Campo Lugar and the wide open fields of this area. We stop and scan for a while with the rain belting down. The soundscape is there again with larks and Corn Buntings singing everywhere. We spot some Great Bustards towards the top of a field, one turning itself into a pom-pom. As we scan we realise that there must be around 30 birds here. However, the rain wins and we head off to find somewhere with a bit of shelter. Mark's van spot a Little Owl sitting on a solar panel in a field of solar panels so we stop to look but it has gone. The road is busy and dangerous so we press on.

On the pylons and telegraph poles around Madrigalejo there are large nest boxes and they are there for Rollers to nest in. Mark takes us to an abandoned railway station with large industrial buildings where the station buildings are daubed with graffiti. In the teaming rain it is a bit post-apocalyptic. The station building does provide us with shelter and keeps us dry as we scan around. There are countless Spotless Starlings around and they are mimicking Black Kite. A Black Kite cruises past at distance. Common Cuckoo can be heard and we get flight views of Hoopoe. There are some starlings on the wires above the solar farm but also a larger bird. We have a look and find that it is a Roller! What a bird. This Jackdaw sized bird is a ridiculous blue. There are two of them! Another one has appeared a little further back on the wires. We enjoy prolonged views of both as they drop down to the ground on unsuspecting prey and back up to the wire.

In need of warming up we head to the outskirts of the village and find a cafe where we enjoy our cafe con leche or chocolate whilst being serenaded by a white Canary in a cage and enjoying the pictures of hare coursing behind the bar!

With the rain slightly easing we head around the rice fields of Vegas Altas looking for Collared Pratincoles. We pass the strange community that is surrounded by towering barbed wire fences and the houses in long rows like a barracks or prison camp. It is rather sinister with the dreich weather and not a neon light anywhere! We move slowly around the tracks of this peculiar place. Pratincoles are obvious by their absence but Mark hears Black-bellied Sandgrouse so we stop and have a look. There is a flock of about 20 birds whizzing around. They fly past and then split up and come back together and we all get great flight views. They drop into one of the rice fields in full view so we train the scopes on them just as the heavens open again and the rain comes down in buckets so we dash back into the vans and the moment is lost.

A little further down the road we stop at a bridge over the river Garraligas where we decide to have some lunch. The rain has stopped but only a minority of the group eat out of the vans as it is cold. There is a Water Rail squealing from under the bridge and a Great Reed Warbler is chuntering into action in the reeds along the bank. We get flight views of the Water Rail and then it shows quite well for those of us that are looking at the base of the reeds.

Having spoken to Juan Pedro we are heading to an area of dehesa where we have been told Black-winged Kite have been seen regularly. The rain has now stopped and so we park the vans up around a picnic area and walk out on a track through the oaks. As we have never been here before it is a case of trying a track and seeing what we can find. There is a nice Woodchat Shrike visible when Mark, who is talking about the kite's habits of sitting up on poles or on the tops of trees, quietly says, "and here's one here!" He points out the tree ahead that he is looking at and there is a beautiful grey and white raptor. There are actually two together on the tree and one of them flies up and around before alighting out of view. What beautifully graceful little raptors they are. Through the scopes we can see their red eye and the raised wings of the one that flew. What a treat. Some of us come over all emotional with the views.

We retrace our steps, as it were, to the ruined station at Madrigalejo where we look for Rollers in the rain again and scan for Stone Curlew. We get further views of the gaudy Roller but no sign of Stone Curlew. High on the tower of the industrial building is a very smart male Lesser Kestrel whilst a male Common Kestrel is on the top of a telegraph pole for comparison.

Juan Pedro has given us information about a new reserve development around an embalse to the south of the hotel that he thinks is worth a visit. It is also holding a quartet of Ring-necked Ducks so we head there for a bit of twitching. As we turn in, it is apparent how much money has been spent on track provision and visitor facilities. At the base of the dam there is a horde of egrets, Great White in with Little, with Grey Heron and a single Purple Heron to complete the set. Mark suggests we try up the road towards the end bay. We park up and get out to scan.

There are White Storks everywhere and a group of Spoonbills in the bay that soon spook and fly off. There are Black-winged Stilts, Greenshank, Shoveler and Shelduck out on the water. A single Egyptian Goose makes an appearance and we get great views of

a smart Iberian Grey Shrike. A Black-headed Gull flies past as the Spoonbills return. A Cuckoo is calling and we get fabulous views as it perches up in a tree opposite us. A dark Booted Eagle flies over the trees and the first Griffon Vultures of the day finally decide that the weather is benign enough to warrant a flap. This is quite a site! Birds everywhere. We do not find the Ring-necked Ducks but decide to carry on the track and see if they are lurking around the corner. Scanning as we go we arrive back at the dam on the opposite side where a track takes us back under the dam. There is a Little-ringed Plover on the track ahead of Mark's van so the other one repositions itself for good views. On the dam is a collection of Yellow Wagtails like bright yellow jewels. They are a mixture of the Iberian form, with a pale blue cap and white supercilium, and the British form Flavissima that is predominately yellow. We get closer views as we creep down the track under the dam. We get nice close views of Common Sandpiper here also. We all agree that this site is fabulous and worthy of spending more time in the future.

After yet another sumptuous meal a small band of us head out to a local village where we get stonking views of Scops Owl in the municipal park opposite the pub!

Day 7 Our last full day in Extremadura. Mark finds us a superb Marbled Newt under a broken tile by the fountain at the hotel. What an animal! Green with reddish blotches more like a salamander.

Heading out in the murk again this morning but with our hopes high for an improvement on the recent weather, we head back towards Monfrague and stop at an area of scrub called Jaraicejo where we head out for a walk to look for warblers. As we walk along the sky is looking particularly dark. There is a Woodlark on a telegraph wire that shows well through the scopes. We can hear Sardinian Warbler and at a crossroads Mark tries a bit of lure. Duncan hears a response but the beastie is not for showing. There is a Woodchat Shrike showing and the occasional Black Kite wings through. The sky is darkening by the second when with an almighty crash the thunder booms above us, the air is rent by lightning and the rain descends in Biblical proportions! We take shelter beneath some trees (!) and wait for it to pass. Thankfully there is no more electrical stuff and the rain eventually starts to ease enough for us to leg it back to the vans. Wow.

As we head towards our first stop of the holiday at Arricampo Penny spots a Black-winged Kite on top of a pylon. We screech around and head back for a look. We manage to get both vans off the busy road safely and watch this stunning little raptor as it takes off from the pylon and shows us the unmistakable flight profile. Fantastic! The weather is improving and we park up to look for Savi's Warbler again. We can hear the reeling song as soon as we get out of the vans. Mark goes to the lagoon to look for Little Bittern and spots one straight away! We descend on him for directions and some of us get views of this stunning little heron as it slips down and out of view. Back over by 'stinky Badger' we get great views of big purple chickens and Purple Herons. Marsh Harriers are fantastic to watch and we get views as they land on a bank. We hear a Reed Warbler singing and eventually get it in the scopes. It is quite close and showing well. We get good views eventually of Savi's with egrets and herons and White Storks as a back drop. There is further Little Bittern viewing over by the lake

and brief views of a large dark eagle that doesn't reappear!

We head into the National Park of Monfrague and head straight (with detour) to Villareal de San Carlos for lunch. There are still spots of rain but increasingly larger chunks of blue sky. Thankfully there is shelter at the picnic site and we stay dry whilst looking for Hawfinch. We do get serenaded by Corn Bunting!

As the rain clears and the sun comes out we arrive at the mirador at Portilla del Tiatar. The Griffon Vultures are obvious as is a single Black Vulture that wings over showing just how massive this bird is. The Imperial Eagle on her nest is quite vocal and very glad that the rain has stopped. She is very keen to dry out which is great for us as she takes to the wing and flies up to a dead branch and spreads her wings. Over the next hour or so we get stunning views of this impressive eagle. Bonelli's Warbler gives some the runaround and those that missed Subalpine Warbler earlier in the week get great views here. Rock Buntings are found by Barry and Irene and Kathleen is seriously impressed with these stunning birds.

We finish our day and the trip back at Pena Falcon. The huge cliff rears out of the river and is surrounded by Griffon Vultures. The Black Stork is still on her nest, Blue Rock Thrushes are serenading us from their rock perches and Mark finds us a young Bonelli's Eagle high above us above the Griffons; the rufous underwings showing well. However all things must come to an end and we drag ourselves away in the warmth of the evening back to Vina Las Torres for one final stunning meal. After dinner we play with the Scops Owl in the village again only this time the children of the village are with us wondering what on earth we are doing.

Always a difficult thing to do the species of the trip is Spanish Imperial Eagle closely followed by Montagu's Harriers, Black-winged Kites, bustards and Rollers. Place of the trip was a tie between Pena Falcon and Vina las Torres with the steppes of Magasca and Santa Marta and Monty Junction getting votes. Magic moments are always very personal but the experience of harriers displaying at Monty junction got the votes of most.

As always our huge thanks go to Juan Pedro, Belen and their family for making us feel so special and welcome, what a beautiful place Vina las Torres is. Mark and Duncan would like to thank you all for being such fun to be with and look forward to sharing further adventures with you in the future.

SPECIES LISTS

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Spoonbill
Greylag Goose
Egyptian Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Teal
Black-shouldered Kite
Black Kite
Red Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Short-toed Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Lesser Kestrel
Common Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Quail
Moorhen
Purple Swamp Hen/Gallinule
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Meadow Pipit
"Spanish" Yellow Wagtail

Coot
Little Bustard
Great Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Little Ringed Plover
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Common Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Common Cuckoo
Long-eared Owl (heard)
Eagle Owl
Tawny Owl (heard)
Scops Owl
Little Owl
Common Swift
Pallid Swift
Alpine Swift
Common Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
Roller
Hoopoe
Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow

Yellow Wagtail
White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Wren
Robin (heard)
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Common Redstart
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Spectacled Warbler (heard)
Subalpine Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Western Orphean Warbler (heard)
Blackcap
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Bonelli's Warbler
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Nuthatch
Iberian Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Small Copper
Holly Blue
Southern Brown Argus
Nettle Tree Butterfly
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Small Tortoiseshell
Speckled Wood

Red Avadavat
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting
Carrion Crow

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Iberian Hare
Red Deer
Red Fox
Beech Marten (dead)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Common Toad
Natterjack Toad
Marbled Newt
Moorish Gecko
Iberian Frog
Spanish Psamadromus

LEPIDOPTERA

Spanish Festoon
Common Swallowtail
Southern Scarce Swallowtail
Western Dappled White
Large White
Small White
Clouded Yellow

Wall

Spanish Marbled White

Broad-bordered Bee Hawkmoth

Giant Peacock moth

OTHER SPECIES

Yellow Scorpion

Red Striped Oil Beetle