

Holiday Highlights

Extremadura

9-16 April 2016

Guides: Duncan Macdonald and Julian Sykes

Guests: Penny Overton & Patsy Kettle, Susan & Mike Jenkins, Pam & John Hall, Christine Sweeting, Anthony Dance, Marilyn Freed, David Johnston and Stephen Evans

Day 1: We have an early start this morning as we gather at Gatwick Airport at 5:25am in order to catch our flight to Madrid. Our flight is delayed by an hour and we sit on the plane in a drizzly London. Eventually we are airborne and winging our way to Madrid where, when we land, Julian is waiting for us.

After securing our vehicles we are finally on our way and the excitement is tangible. We wander our way around the outskirts of the Spanish capital and find the road that takes us south-west towards the Portuguese border. It is not long before the birds start to mount up including Grey Heron, Black Vulture, Booted Eagle, Cattle and Little Egrets, Montagu's Harrier, Common Buzzard and both species of Kite.

We take a break at a handy spot on the motorway just outside Talavera for coffee. There is a pair of Lesser Kestrels here while White Storks soar overhead and Corn Buntings and Crested Larks are everywhere. We even find a couple of butterflies, both Small White and Clouded Yellow and there is an Egyptian Grasshopper to add to the fun.

Finally we pull up in front of the sublime Viña Las Torres where Juan Pedro and Belen are awaiting us with a fabulous welcome. Once we have rested we are treated to one of Belen's sumptuous meals, washed down with some wine and serenaded by Alejandro on the clarinet. Life is abundant.

Day 2: The morning dawns dark and overcast as we head towards the low sierra near Deleitosa. We stop at an area giving views out over the dehesa where we find Thekla Lark, Dartford Warbler, Stonechat, Blue Rock Thrush and Woodlark. The Woodlark sings from an overhead wire giving superb views. The skies are darkening further as we move on, heading for a castle on the ridge, but we miss the turning! We turn around and head back towards the plains at Belen. As we travel through fabulous dehesa we notice the sky turning blue! We decide to stop and we hear Woodlark everywhere as we get out the coffee. A Common Cuckoo gives us great views and we find a Nuthatch that sits up on the top of a small oak. Christine and Steve find three Woodchat Shrikes while both Black and Griffon Vultures cruise overhead. We hear snatches of Western Orphean Warbler but we only manage the briefest of views.

Out in the plains past Aldeacentenera Julian spots a Short-toed Eagle so we stop for a look. Whilst enjoying the eagle an Egyptian Vulture cruises low over head. Anthony finds two Common Kestrels hunting when a second Egyptian Vulture is spotted. There are Stonechats and a Black-eared Wheatear on the fences.

At the crossroads we turn left as if heading towards Belen. There is a piggery here and we are hoping that there might be a carcass or two out to lure in vultures but there seems to be nothing happening, so we turn around and take a secondary track where there is another pig farm but again there is nothing doing. At the entrance to a finca we stop for some lunch in the wind, but at least it is not raining. There are vultures in the sky here of both species but mainly Griffons. There are both Red and Black kites to admire and some of the Black Kites are feeding on a lamb carcass.

We cruise past the piggery again and hope for vultures on the ground, but we find only White Storks. John finds some Black Vultures on the ground and more are beginning to spiral into the air from further up so we head in their direction. We get great views of Black, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures on a carcass, superb! Calandra Larks are everywhere and David finds us a Meadow Pipit.

We retrace our steps back towards Belen and past some ponds where we find, Mallard, Little Grebe, Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper, Greenshank and Black-winged Stilt. The rain is beginning to curb our enthusiasm; there are bustards out here but its not going to be easy in this murk so we head back to the hotel to relax.

Day 3: After breakfast we mount up and head to the heath-like habitat at Jaraicejo where we head out for a walk to look for Spectacled Warbler. As we start walking the rain gets steadily heavier and there is a biting wind to add to our discomfort. A Dartford Warbler makes a brief appearance and we can hear both Thekla and Woodlarks singing. Amongst some large oaks we seek shelter where we can hear Nightingale in the little valley beneath us and we get brief flight views. A Subalpine Warbler alights in the oak above us and we really enjoy this stonking warbler.

We abandon ship and head to Torrejon el Rubio for some coffee with the locals. From the car park we see House Martin, House Sparrow, Serin, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Black Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Black Kite as well as both pale and dark Booted Eagles. What a list before we have even ordered!

We drive into Monfrague National Park and Julian's van almost immediately gets views of Bee-eater. There are vultures soaring ahead as well as Alpine Swifts, but we keep going to Pena Falcon. This huge cliff rears up out of the river Tajo and it is awe-inspiring to see how many vultures are soaring above it. They are perched on the crags behind us as well and as we scan through them we find Black Kite and Booted Eagles too. Julian finds us a Montague's Harrier soaring and

we add Peregrine to our raptor list. Sue has walked on a bit and finds us a fabulously close Blue Rock Thrush on a dead tree while Crag Martins whizz around our ears. Through lunch we keep alert for eagles. Christine, Sue and Mike are having their lunch a little further up from the rest of us and they get a very obliging Rock Bunting. Black Redstart is another new bird for the trip and Christine goes on to find us a Subalpine Warbler. We drive a short distance to the bridge over the Tajo where hundreds and hundreds of House Martins nest beneath it - what an impressive sight this is. Black Stork and Alpine Swifts are soaring above.

At Valle del Tietar we start to look for our main target here; Spanish Imperial Eagle. We know where there is an active and visible nest but as we train the scopes that way, the heavens open! Duncan's group take shelter under the trees but he eventually runs back for the van so that we all stay relatively dry. After a while the rain stops and we can get out and start searching once more. We get the scopes on the nest where we can make out the female's head. Julian and his contingent arrive and almost instantly an eagle starts to call. It is the male coming in and he lands right on top of the crag opposite, what a view there is, now against bright blue sky. Over the next hour we watch them change over on the nest to allow the female to dry off, the male harassing Griffon Vultures and even the pair mating. The wings look like they have had white paint spilt over the leading edge. What a treat and worth the wait.

At Villa de San Carlos we have dinner in a local restaurant and later David spots a Red-rumped Swallow amongst the throng of Barn Swallows and House Martins. Dinner is plentiful and good after which we mount up and head back to the Tietar to listen and scan for Eagle Owls. There is nothing happening so in the dark we head back to Vina las Torres after a fun-filled day.

Day 4: The very heavy rain overnight has cleared as we emerge for breakfast but it is still very overcast and moist with cloud down to the roof-tops. We are heading out to the plains near Campo Lugar today and once we get off the main road onto the unsurfaced road we can take things a little easier and stop where we like to scan. Corn Buntings and Crested Larks are everywhere. We see some large white dots ahead, could they be? YES! Great Bustards! The males are displaying to impress the females, making the birds look vaguely ridiculous, a bit like a large, white pom-pom. These are huge birds and they make for quite a sight. Calandra larks are singing and while we are enjoying the view Julian finds us a perched Little Owl and then quickly follows with a Great-spotted Cuckoo that is working along a bit of fence line. There must be 20-30 Bustards here along with Cattle Egrets amongst the sheep, superb!

We travel on in increasing rain and a couple of Montague's Harriers are spotted but they don't come close. The rain gets heavier as we approach Campo Lugar where there are nest boxes for Roller on the pylons. There is a distant Roller on one of the wires but in this deluge it seems pointless. We turn around and

retrace our steps to Madrigalejo where we take a small road out to some rice fields. There are birds out here, in the thickening rain, including a couple of Collared Pratincoles but they are flighty and it is again very difficult to try and look in this wet. We head to the village and the old station where we can get some shelter for lunch. There are Roller boxes here also and there is a Roller on a wire as soon as we park! There is a Lesser Kestrel perched on the old tower and we find Booted Eagle from our shelter.

After Lunch we head to the large reservoir at Sierra Brava. There are Gull-billed Terns over the water and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Both Little and Great Crested Grebes complete the picture here although we also get fantastic views of both Marsh and Montague's Harrier.

We finish our day with a visit to the newly developed facilities at the Embalse de Alcollarin. There is a fantastic road right around the reservoir and plenty of opportunity to get out and scan and also to picnic at the multitude of benches and tables. The weather has improved tremendously and the rain has stopped although we can see that it may still hit us in squalls. Just before one of these we are amazed to witness thousands of Sand Martins coming past us low ahead of the squall. Out on the water there is Gadwall, Mallard, Red-crested Pochard, Shoveler and Teal. Julian finds an Egyptian Goose and there are plenty of White Storks. We find Shelduck and Pintail as well as Spoonbill and Glossy Ibis, what a place this is. Booted Eagles make an appearance as does another Marsh Harrier. Little Egrets are everywhere and we enjoy going through the different races of Yellow Wagtail on show.

At one picnic site we are enjoying the view of Whiskered Tern out over the water when there is a soft whistle from Julian that draws our attention. He is beckoning us and when we are with him he directs our attention to an old storks nest only a few feet above our heads. A barred tail is visible and when we look more closely we can see orange eyes and ear tufts. It is a Long-eared Owl sitting and keeping a beady eye on what we are doing. What a treat! We watch here for ages before thinking that we do not want to disturb her too much and we quietly slip off and head for home.

Day 5: The weather has improved overnight and it is a more pleasant day today. To the west of Trujillo are the steps of Santa Marta and we head for 'Happening Corner' (as we like to call it) to see what we can see. David is quick off the mark with an Iberian Grey Shrike showing nicely then Anthony finds us a bachelor Great Bustard and there are Stonechats and Corn Buntings aplenty. David then locates a male Monty's Harrier and Julian gets us onto a Male Little Bustard that is viewable though some broom; it does walk out into the clear though and we get to see it a bit better. Patsy manages to relocate the male Great Bustard and a pale Booted Eagle drifts over.

There are another couple of birdwatchers scoping a little further up the road so we too stop for a look. There is a fabulous male Great Bustard in full display on the ridge-line with a harem of females; they really are amazing, all fluff and pompom. Julian quickly gets onto a group of about half a dozen Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on the opposite bank and showing beautifully in the sunlight. These birds suddenly take flight and we get great flight views. This is quickly followed by a bigger flock of around 25 birds; they are close enough to hear their purring call. A Golden Oriole is singing from some oaks behind us and with a little perseverance we manage to get some good views before we realise that there is a male out in the open on a fence near to where the Great Bustard was, this bird is hunting and keeps plunging onto the ground and up again.

Further on we stop for coffee where Julian completes our desire for sandgrouse with great views of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, again on the ground and in good view. We watch this flock for a while as it takes us a while to get everyone onto them, scopes are positioned and repositioned as the group of birds is quite mobile and look like sand-coloured rocks!!

Later at a bridge over the Rio Magasca we stop for lunch. We hear Cirl Bunting here and we enjoy our lunch in a marvelous location.

Back at Monty Junction we admire Great Bustards again and relocate a male Little Bustard as well as both Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrike.

Back in Trujillo we park by the bullring so that we can get good views of Lesser Kestrel. They do not disappoint, perching on the roof of the building and flying around, we get superb views of these great little falcons, sadly there are no Pallid Swifts though.

After a fabulous dinner we head out to the local village of Madroñera where we park in the town square by the municipal park. We are here for an owl, a very small owl and we hear one calling pretty quickly and then there are certainly two calling. With a bit of toing and froing we eventually get superb views of Scops Owl - what a great way to finish a superb day.

Day 6: We are heading towards Deleitosa again today and Cabanas de Castillo (where we should have gone on our first day). Beneath the ridge we have a quick scan and find Thekla and Wood Larks, Dartford Warblers are zipping through the undergrowth and Sardinian Warblers are singing from fences. Griffon Vultures cruise above the ridge like small planes.

At the Arroyo de la Vid, beneath impressive cliffs we stop beneath warm, blue skies. This is where we were looking for on our first day. Nightingales are singing from all around the river and some of us even manage to get views of these secretive (but noisy) birds. Tea and coffee are served and we enjoy a brew whilst watching Orange-tip butterfly. David finds a Grey Wagtail on the river and Sue

alerts us to an incredibly close Short-toed Eagle that compliments the more distant views that we have had. We get Egyptian Vulture and Peregrine before Julian shouts, "Golden Eagle!" We look where he is pointing and watch the bird as it moves like a rocket before starting to dip display. They are the bird of birds!

Parking at Cabanas del Castillo can be quite tricky but not today thankfully, plenty of room. We pack our lunches and head up the rough path that leads around the shoulder of the castle hill to get amazing views of the valley behind. Alpine Swifts are showing every other bird how to fly, leaving the Common Swifts in their wake. Whilst enjoying our lunch we watch Short-toed Eagles while being serenaded by Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart from the crags above our heads. As we get ready to leave we find a remarkably close Rock Bunting, just look at that humbug head!

As we drive towards Alcántara, we stop and take a walk out to a rather picturesque bridge at the foot of a lovely valley. It is hot now and the sound of humming insects is quite remarkable. Both Black and Red Kites are above the ridges as we walk along turning over stones to look for large centipedes and other mini-beasts. There are White Storks above and a Large Psammmodromus is on the parapet of the bridge. We spend quite some time here as it is so beautiful and Bee-eaters and Crag Martins flit about. Butterflies are represented by Small Copper, Dappled White and Southern Brown Argus and in pools below the bridge we find Freshwater Crayfish.

Out towards Belen we stop and take a walk along a track where we see Great Bustard flying and displaying, they really are like Roe Deer with wings! Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings provide the soundscape. Pam finds a cracking Red-striped Oil Beetle and Julian finds us a male Little Bustard then a female flies in showing us that duck-like flight pattern of theirs.

Just before Viña las Torres Duncan's van spot a Short-toed Eagle on a roadside pylon giving them astounding views.

Day 7: The day dawns warm and clearing and we are going to head north today back towards Monfrague. We stop at the lagoons and reed-beds of Arrocampo under an increasingly warm sun. As soon as we get out of the vans we can hear Savi's Warbler reeling. This is a busy road so, taking care, we head along the side of the road for a view over the reeds. We get onto a bird almost immediately and eventually get views of at least three individual birds. Reed and Cetti's Warbler add to the sound. Moorhen and Coot are quickly added as are both Purple and Grey Herons. Purple Swamp Hens are noisy and we get fleeting views of a couple of these crazy purple chickens. Gadwall are on the lake behind us and we find a few smart Gull-billed Terns as well along with both Cattle and Little Egrets in good number. David also finds a Night Heron and Julian points out a fabulous male Little Bittern that is right in front of us, sun bathing! We find another Night Heron and a pair of Marsh Harriers make a nuisance of themselves

spooking birds left, right and centre. Black Kites, Griffon Vultures and White Storks soar above us only adding to the flavour. We are constantly on the look out for Black-shouldered Kite as this is one of the most reliable sites for them.

Near Saucedilla we take a side road to scan around. We stop and look along the pylon line where Anthony spots a couple of Lesser Kestrels and a couple of Hoopoes harass each other along a fence. We stop at the ornithological centre in Saucedilla to use their facilities and fight off a mutiny concerning coffee!. We head into the reserve and as we approach a T-junction a Black-shouldered Kite is spotted ahead behind a large water tower, so we park up as we turn left. There is a small reservoir and we find Lapwing in the dehesa behind us with Cattle and Little Egrets in the reservoir. We get out into the growing heat with Black and Red Kites obvious around us. John spots a female Pintail amongst the Water Crowfoot and three Common Sandpipers fly in and give us good views. We decide to break out the lunch and coffee here to a huge cheer! There is a White Stork nesting on the roof of one of the hides which is fun. All of a sudden Julian shouts "I've got one!" We all look to where he is looking and get brief views of a Black-shouldered Kite, but it is all too brief.

Another minibus pulls up with an English group led by a guide who lives near to the Viña Las Torres. He tells us that there is a road leading into the dehesa where we saw the kite. Jumping into the vans we tear round to this road and follow the other group up the road looking in all directions. The other group dismounts and are scanning around when a Black-shouldered Kite flies across the road ahead of them - the chase is on! We park up and almost instantly a stunning Black-shouldered Kite appears to our right and gets closer and closer until it passes right over our heads! Wow, what a bird! There are two of these stunning little raptors with their bright red eyes, one of the most sought after species in Europe and we are enjoying remarkable views. We watch, spellbound, for nearly an hour as these two birds hover, hunt and perch. Eventually we drag ourselves away, smiling like Cheshire cats.

We head off through Serrejón and into Monfrague National Park where there are countless Crested Larks, Corn Buntings, Azure-winged Magpies, Woodchat Shrikes and Black Kites as we drive along, with one field having over twenty Black Kites in it. We cruise past Portilla del Tietar where Anthony spots a Spanish Imperial Eagle taking off from a nest - great spotting at this speed! As we approach Villarreal de San Carlos a Black Vulture nearly peels the roof off Julian's van it is that close! We stop here for 30 minutes for comfort stops and ice cream.

Pena Falcon is simply staggering! We loved it the first time around and it is just as impressive this time. Griffon Vultures are passing us so low that we can hear the air rushing through their wings. We get great views of Black Stork down near the river and we enjoy Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting too. A Peregrine

soars and dives through the mass of Griffon Vultures. It is hard to drag ourselves away from this magical place, a place that will forever be imprinted on our minds.

Our last dinner is a sumptuous affair accompanied by a gorgeous red wine from Navarra. The meals that Belen has produced have been sublime and this is no exception. Christine is honoured with a second helping of her favourite dessert of the week - lemon cream and Alejandro serenades us with the clarinet as we relax and soak in the homeliness of this wonderful place.

Day 8: It is pouring with rain as we have breakfast and then pack up the vans. We say our fond farewells and head out onto the autovia heading towards Madrid. With the weather as it is the opportunities for birding are fleeting but we still manage to see Griffon Vulture, Black and Red Kite, Buzzard, Common and Lesser Kestrels, Azure-winged and Common Magpie, Iberian and Woodchat Shrike, Crested Lark and Collared Dove - not bad in the rain! We break up the journey with some coffee but as we approach Madrid the rain is biblical. We find Terminal I, unload and say our fond farewells to Julian as he is staying on and starting another trip today! We check in and are soon winging our way home.

Species of the Trip: This was quite close but the Great Bustards get the most votes with Spanish Imperial Eagle and Black-shouldered Kite coming close.

Place of the Trip: This was close as well but the old bridge over the Rio Almonte wins by a vote.

Magic Moment: The amazing Long-eared Owl experience at the Embalse Alcollarin wins handsomely.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Little Bittern
Night Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Spoonbill
Glossy Ibis
Black Stork
White Stork
Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Pintail
Shoveler
Wigeon
Teal
Red-crested Pochard
Red-legged Partridge
Quail
Pheasant
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Egyptian Vulture
Golden Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Short-toed Eagle
Booted Eagle
Red Kite
Black Kite
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Buzzard
Black-shouldered Kite
Common Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel
Peregrine
Moorhen
Coot
Purple Swamp Hen
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper

Greenshank
Snipe
Ruff
Black-headed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Gull-billed Tern
Whiskered Tern
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Common Cuckoo
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Long-eared Owl
Scops Owl
Little Owl
Common Swift
Alpine Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Bee-eater
Roller
Great Spotted Woodpecker (H)
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Calandra Lark
Short-toed Lark
Sand Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Meadow Pipit
White wagtail
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Stonechat
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackcap
Common Whitethroat

Western Orphean Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Subalpine Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Savi's Warbler
Cetti's Warbler
Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Chiffchaff
Wren
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Penduline Tit (H)
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Azure-winged Magpie
Common Magpie
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
Golden Oriole
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Red Avadavat
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting
Egyptian Goose

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Red Deer
Wood Mouse
Noctule Bat
Daubenton's Bat

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Spanish Terrapin
Iberian Marsh Frog
Natterjack Toad
Marbled Newt
Large Psammodromus
Iberian Wall Lizard

BUTTERFLIES

Clouded Yellow
Small White
Red Admiral
Swallowtail
Small Heath
Common Blue
Painted Lady
Western Dappled White
Small Copper
Southern Brown Argus

Other species of note

Egyptian Grasshopper
Scolopendra
Silver Y Moth
Red Striped Oil Beetle
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Freshwater Crayfish