

WINGSPAN BIRD TOURS

TOUR OF

COTO DONANA & EXTREMADURA

18TH – 25TH MAY 2008

LEADER BOB BUCKLER LEADING FOR BIRDFINDERS

SUMMARY

We had an excellent week of birding spoilt only by bouts of inclement weather, a couple of days were very windy with light showers and our visit to Monfrague Park in Extremadura was foreshortened by heavy rain. The temperature was kept in the lower 20's by unseasonal cold winds, but all in all, we had a great time.



We notched up 168 species seeing all the specialities of Donana which included Red-Knobbed Coot, Marbled Duck, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black-winged Kite, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great Egret, Savi's Warbler, Azure-winged Magpie and lots more. In Extremadura the weather patterns were also very unusual, experiencing lots of rain during May. This had the adverse effect of nourishing the grass which had grown very long making viewing of certain species much harder. We saw Great Bustard very well and Little Bustard distantly, Black-bellied Sandgrouse showed well in flight only and Pin-tailed were only noted by call. Our two evening excursions for Red-necked Nightjar were abandoned because of the weather. However we saw Black Wheatear, Black-eared Wheatear, Rock Bunting, Rock Petronia, Black Vulture, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Eagle Owl, Black Stork, Crested Tit and lots of Golden Orioles.

DAY I SUNDAY 18TH MAY

The group assembled in the arrivals hall at Faro airport around 10:15 and despite arriving from three different destinations there were no hitches when meeting up. After unpacking telescopes and binoculars we were under way in a sleek air conditioned mini-bus for the journey into Spain. Several species we noted during the journey towards the Spanish border, these included White Stork, Black Kite and Azure-winged Magpie.

A planned stop at the border was made at Castro Marim, a 'reserva natural' on the banks of the Rio Guadario. This reserve attracts many waders, terns and gulls in the scrapes made from disused salt pans, the surrounding scrub provides cover for warblers, shrikes, larks and wagtails. Firstly, we sat and ate our picnic lunch as we watched Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola, Goldfinch and a small number of both Common and Pallid Swifts overhead.

But as expected it was waders that came to the fore, with Pied Avocet, Grey Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Kentish & Ringed Plovers and Redshank all in good numbers and a Stone Curlew was an added bonus. A few Little Terns were feeding in the shallow lagunas and White Stork, Bee-eater, Cattle & Little Egrets and Spoonbill were noted in flight. In the scrub we found a nest with four chicks of Sardinian Warbler and in the distance we logged Marsh Harrier, Spotless Starling and Southern Grey Shrike.

Our next stop was at the Marismas de O'Diel which is a huge area of salt pans, wet scrubland, open lagunas, dry heath and miles of salt marsh. It was at a visitor's centre near the entrance where we stopped first and in the adjacent laguna we saw Pied Avocet, Eurasian Spoonbill, Gadwall, Common Coot, Dunlin, Common Pochard, Spanish Yellow Wagtail and Black-headed Gull. Crossing the road we 'scoped' the salt pans where large numbers of Greater Flamingos were feeding and on the sandy banks we saw Gull-billed and Common Terns, more Black-headed Gulls, Yellow-legged and Lesser Blacked Backed Gulls.

Driving further into the reserve we made several stops where we picked up Little, Black and Sandwich Terns, Curlew, Whimbrel, Turnstone and there were also many Red Knot in brilliant summer plumage feeding with Bar-tailed Godwits. Near the lighthouse point we surveyed a gull roost which held Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gull, Sandwich, Common and Little Terns. The wind had picked up considerably and it whipped the sea waves up and over the defence wall soaking the bus at times, so we beat a hasty retreat. On the way back we stopped to watch an emerging sandbar on the retreating tide, first Sandwich Terns arrived, then Common Terns followed by Little Terns and they were joined by groups of Dunlin and Sanderling.

Moving on, we made our final stop on the outskirts of Huelva near the industrial complex and gas-works, not the best of settings for a nature reserve but the birdlife seemed unaffected as there was plenty to see. A good number of Whiskered Terns formed a loose colony amid a grassy island in the laguna, half a dozen Purple Swampheens were feeding in the reed fringed shoreline and many other species were noted. It was getting late in the afternoon and as a rain storm began we decided to call it a day and as we loaded into the bus we noted Bee-eater and Turtle Dove, our last two species of the day.

DAY 2 MONDAY 19TH MAY

Our first full day in Coto Donana was spent with trips to three of the most well known visitors centres, the first being El Rocio. We approached from the south and drove into the town so that we could overlook the Laguan de Madre de la Marisma with the sun behind us. Many Flamingo were feeding in the shallow water along with Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Coot, Common Pochard and a good number of black-winged Stilts. Cattle and Little



Egrets were dotted about as were Grey Heron and Gadwall. Moving further into town we searched a clump of reeds and found Great Reed Warbler which showed very well, Black Kites drifted overhead and were joined with a steady flow of White Storks.

Our next stop was the 'ancient woodland' that lies next to the Palacio de Acebron, it lies within the La Rocina section of the Donana Reserve. We drove through the heathland to get there and stopped to watch Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike, Dartford Warbler, Booted Eagle and Stonechat along the way. As soon as we emerged from the bus at the woodland we were met by a flourish of bird song. Nightingales were prolific, they sang from every corner of the wood, in fact the

first bird we saw a very showy individual. We set off on the trail logging Wren, Blackcap, Chaffinch and several Short-toed Treecreepers, all in the first 100 meters. Then over the next hour we watched Serin, Hawfinch, Blue Tit, more Treecreepers and a Black-crowned Night Heron that flew over the pool.

Along the main driveway we added Crested Tit to the list and one or two Black Kites drifted overhead, we set then set off to the main reserve centre at La Rocina where we visited a number of hides and spent a couple of hours walking the superb woodland boardwalks. The main highlight was a singing Iberian Chiffchaff which took quite a time to track down but showed well in the end. Other highlights included, Purple Swamphen, a reeling Savi's Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Serin, Tree Sparrow and more Nightingales.

We then made a short visit back at El Rocio to search through the Eurasian Coot flock hoping to pick out a Red-knobbed Coot but many of them were far off in the distance so we abandoned the mission and set off for the Acebuche Reserve.

Azure-winged Magpies came down to bread and posed for our cameras in the car park at Acebuche and the coffee shop proved very popular with the group as did the live cam-link to the captive breeding Spanish Lynx, two kittens were delightful in their playful manoeuvres. Finally we got to do some birding watching! The late afternoon wind had picked up so we restricted our visit to the many hides that overlooked the large laguna de Acebuche. Along the boardwalk we had brief views of Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, another Booted Eagle and plenty of Azure-winged Magpies.

We visited a number of hides where we watched Bee-eaters, the usual fare on the water and we had very close views of a Little Bittern. We decide to pay one more visit to El Rocio to search the laguna for the elusive Coot and guess what – the Coot was as elusive as ever.

DAY 3 TUESDAY 20TH MAY

Today we drove up passed El Rocio and headed east to Villamanrique and then we turned onto to dirt track which led to the Corredor de Verde. Our first stop was just beyond a bridge where we walked into a field of open grassland dotted with small fir and larger deciduous trees. This was ideal habitat for the Black-winged Kite and was not too long before we were watching a pair of them. What a stunning bird, we saw it perched, flying and hovering like a Kestrel. Several other birds put in an appearance which included Greenfinch, Woodchat Shrike and the first of several Booted Eagles.

Next we drove back along the trail and followed the Corredor southward towards the northern marshes of Donana. We stopped at an open laguna that had many dead trees sitting in it. There we notched up Tree Sparrow, Red Kite, Black Kite more Booted Eagles, Lesser Kestrel, Sardinian Warbler and Hoopoe. We heard a Common Cuckoo and overhead there were hundreds of Pallid and Common Swifts. At the end of the dirt track we emerge onto a tarmac road which stood raised above the surrounding fields of rice. But before we searched the rice fields we made our way to Dehesa de Pilas which is a small area just off the main road which contains a huge square wood of Eucalyptus. There were thousands of birds in the sky, along the hedgerows and on the wires. Hundreds more Pallid and Common Swifts filled the air, Bee-eaters littered the wires, hundreds of Spanish Sparrows dashed between the hedgerows and the wood. High in the trees and on the pylons dozens of White Storks had made their nests, along the edge of the wood we picked out the nest a Black Kite and we could just make out a couple of young chicks in the nest.

Seeding of the rice fields had just started and some of the fields were just being flooded, they held many birds along the water line. Gull-billed Tern and Whiskered Terns skimmed the water picking off insects whilst Cattle and Little Egrets waded through it. Ringed and Little Ringed Plover, White and Spanish Wagtail, Redshank and Dunlin all fed along the water line.

A little further along the road we stopped to view an Egret colony which held hundreds of cattle Egret nests, the birds were looking resplendent in their summer garb, also many Black-crowned Night Herons were sitting on nests.

Our next stop was huge man made lake and designated nature reserve called Dehesa de Abajo , this area holds one of the largest colonies of White Storks in the whole of Spain which could be seen in the distant dehesa beyond the lake. In the water there were plenty Flamingos, Spoonbills, Black-winged Stilts and Grebes, all three species were present Black-necked, Little and great Crested.

Opposite the lake a track ran off into the rice fields and alongside the track a good stretch of reedbeds can be found. It was the reedbeds that we visited next, we drove along the track and parked in the only space available and as soon as we emerged from the bus we could hear the reeling sound of a Savi's Warbler, with a little coaxing the bird drew very close and put on a fantastic show for us, the cameras were clicking for a good while. Whilst we ate our picnic lunch we watched distant Marsh Harriers working the fields, a Zitting Cisticola building a nest and several Spanish Yellow Wagtails feeding on the dry mud of a seasonal pool.

The place for us to visit was the Jose Valverde Visitors centre which required a long drive along some bumpy tracks, we made many stops along the way to watch Short-toed Larks, Calandra Larks, a Great Egret, several Purple Herons and lots of Little and Cattle Egrets.

Around the centre we had brief views of a Marbled Duck in flight twice! What a great find. We saw all three grebes again, many ducks and waders, egrets, herons and terns what a great place. A male Little Bittern in flight was a great delight, lots of Great Reed Warblers screeched from the reedbeds and another reeling Savi's Warbler gave us a brief glimpse. Other birds in view were Glossy Ibis, Avocet, Red-crested Pochard, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Redshank, Greenshank, Dunlin and Ruddy Turnstone.

We entered the visitor's centre to take a coffee break and looking through the large plate glass windows we could see a fabulous array of birds in the huge breeding egret colony and what a noise! We searched for the Western Reef Heron (dark phase) which once again returned to breed with a little Egret, but alas we had no luck.

We took a different Track as we headed towards El Rocio along which we saw more of the same bird species, in addition there were a couple more Calandra Larks, several Collared Pratincoles, three more Great Egrets and a Little Owl in the usual spot at the base of a small bridge.

Heading back towards the centre we stopped for a last look at the large open laguna, a lovely Hobby drifted overhead, then during several short stops on the way home we logged an incredible array of raptors which included Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, Common Kestrel, Black Kite, Black-winged Kite and the icing on the cake a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, what a tally, nine raptors in thirty minutes. We also saw many more larks but failed to find the elusive Lesser Short-toed Lark.

DAY 4 WEDNESDAY 21ST MAY

We decided to travel across the Guadalquivir 'river' today and search for some specialist species around the marshes and salt pans near to Sanlucar. We were on the road by 8 am and headed northeast towards Sevilla, our first stop was at the pine woods near to Hinojos where we looked for Woodlark but saw only Bee-eater, Raven, Azure-winged Magpie, Greenfinch and Crested Tit. We heard a Common Cuckoo but failed to see it. We then headed for the ferry at Coria and after sometime we managed to negotiate the narrow streets and roadwork diversions to join the ferry crossing. We noted Black-crowned Night Heron whilst waiting for our crossing. Once across the mighty Guadalquivir river we travelled the short distance to the reserve at Brazo de Este where we spent a couple of hours watching a good variety of marshland birds, these included; Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, Purple and Grey Herons, Little Bittern, Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt, White Stork, Reed, Great Reed and Cetti's Warblers, Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola and some of us watched Yellow Crowned Bishops (female and 'winter' plumaged males). Very Few raptors were seen.

The weather warmed up considerably so we headed off to our next destination the Marismas de Trebujena, which lie adjacent to the river and consist of large areas of open salt marsh and several large lagunas. It was on one of these that we found five Marbled Duck that were showing well and loosely associating with Common Pochard. A small island held a Little Tern colony, several nesting Black-winged Stilts and a few Pied Avocets. You can imagine the noise when a Black Kite came over, as one did on several occasions, putting up a mass of birds.



We had good views of Spanish Wagtail and overhead we notched our second Red Kite of the trip and a small number of Griffon Vultures, other birds present on the laguna were Greater Flamingo, Spoonbill, Red-crested Pochard, Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls and we saw a fly-by Slender-billed Gull. Collared Pratincoles over-flew the track and we had a brief sighting of a Lesser Short-toed Lark which was pursued by Kevin who confirmed its identity.

After eating our picnic lunch in the bright sunshine we set off on the short trip through the Algaida woods to the small laguna Tarelo on the outskirts of Bonanza. The island in the middle of the laguna held a large Egret colony with many Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night Herons on nests. There were few birds on the water but we did manage to get very poor views of a couple of White-headed Ducks, quite unsatisfactory for most of the group.

We then visited the nearby salt pans at Bonanza where we had great views of Slender-billed Gull and several species of wader. At the north end of the pans we stopped to view a large laguna which had four Black Terns feeding alongside many Little Terns, a commotion drew our attention to an adjacent lagoon where an Osprey was being given an unceremonious 'seeing off' by Black-winged Stilts and Avocets.

Our last destination of the day was Laguna de Medina which was a 40 minute drive from Sanlucar and is found just 10km south of Jerez. As we arrived three coach parties of school children were just leaving, perfect timing! The laguna was covered with birds, mainly Common Coot (about 1000), but also Common and Red-crested Pochard, Gadwall, Mallard and several of our target species, the White Headed Duck. A few of these lovely birds were feeding very close to the shore so we all had great views from the excellent boardwalk that had been recently constructed, three Grebe species were also there (Great Crested, Little and Black-necked). From the reed-beds and the thick scrub along the track came a cacophony of bird song, there were many Great Reed and Eurasian Reed Warblers, Cetti's Warbler, Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola, Melodious and Sardinian Warblers. Other birds of note were Montagu's Harrier, Booted Eagle and a distant Short-toed Eagle. We left about 5pm for the long drive back to Matalascañas.

Thursday 21st May

Coto Donana – Trujillo

An early start found us at breakfast at 5:45am and we were packed and on the road by 6:30, it remained dark until about 7:15 when a beautiful red and pink sunrise lit up the skyline as we passed through Sevilla. We recorded twenty five species of birds by the time we reached Merida where we stopped for a coffee break and just north of this famous 'Roman' town we left the motorway and headed for Trujillo. We had great views of a perched Short-toed Eagle and noted several Azure-winged Magpies, Hoopoes and Bee-eaters, but the real highlight was a good number of sightings of Roller, what a fantastic colourful bird, they were perched in excellent sunlight giving a great display. Raptors became more and more prominent, as expected in Extremadura, lots of Red and Black Kites, Montagu's Harriers and Griffon and Black Vultures.

On the outskirts of Trujillo we stopped at a small pool and recorded Black-winged Stilts, Coots, Mallards and White Wagtails. After stocking up with food at the supermarket we headed out west towards Casares turning off the main road toward Santa Marta de Magascar. Soon we out on the plains ticking off Southern Grey Shrikes, Calandra Larks, Red-legged Partridge, Thekla and Crested Larks, and Corn Buntings. We ate our lunch watching raptor after raptor flying by and we found two Great Bustards one quite distant and the other within 50 meters of the bus! A great sight as it flew off. A Little Owl on a nearby fence was a real crowd pleaser, a Short-toed Lark on the track was brief and a Calandra Lark allowed us to approach within a few meters before it flew off.

For the rest of the afternoon we visited a number of bridges between Santa Marta and Monroy and between Monroy and Casares, noting Crag Martin, Kingfisher, Alpine Swift, Serin, Rock Bunting, Black Wheatear, White Wagtail, Little Ringed Plover and many Terrapins and a couple of Dice Snakes.

Our last destination was a site where we were able to watch a nest of Spanish Imperial Eagles, there was an adult stood over the nest and at least one chick in sight. We pursued the sound of Woodlark until we had sightings of one and in the meantime we discovered the second Imperial Eagle parent which stood on a pylon not too far from the nest. We also saw Woodchat Shrikes and Southern Grey Shrikes along the track as we departed for our hotel.

We arrived at Finca Santa Marta, our home for two nights, at about 6pm and recorded Mistle Thrush, Azure-winged Magpie, Golden Oriole, Wren, Sardinian Warbler and White Stork in the hotel grounds! Dinner was fabulous taken in a dining room that was the old olive-press room, as this hotel is a converted Olive Mill.

Friday 23rd.

We got up at 6am ready for an early trip to the plains at Belen and as we left our warm cosy rooms we were met by steady rainfall, what a bummer, however we persevered and arrived at the plains as the light began to emerge from the thick cloud base. There were many White Storks already feeding in the fields and lots of Calandra larks singing from on high but the grass on the plains was very long and our target species the Little Bustard was going to be hard to find, if at all. We plodded on for a hour or so making several stops along the lane but the rain persisted and having found just one Little Bustard in flight and several Great Bustards, also in flight, we gave up and headed back to the Finca for breakfast.



The rain eased off and with high hopes we set off for the famous Monfrague National Park some 45 minutes away. Our first stop was the Castillo de Monfrague which is a walled fortress set high up on a limestone ridge. As we climbed the stone steps we noted Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Griffon Vulture and Hawfinch. At the top and despite the low cloud there were many vultures in the sky which included Griffon, Black and a single Egyptian Vulture, passerines noted were Black Redstart, Blue-rock Thrush, Chaffinch, Wren and Rock Bunting. As we descended we had further sightings of Hawfinch, Blue-rock Thrush and Rock Bunting and we added Blackcap and Rock Petronia to the list.

Next we drove round to the viewing area at Pena Falcon which overlooks a huge limestone pinnacle on which were perched some 100 Griffon Vultures. Over the next hour we had great views of most of the birds already recorded for that day list and we added Black Stork as we watched a pair attend a nest far below us in an open cave.

We made a couple more stops as we drove deeper into the park where we saw Alpine Swift, hundreds of House Martins nesting under a bridge was an impressive sight, a couple of Woodlarks showed well with one of them in

song-flight. We ate our picnic lunch on the tables provided at the mirador de Tajadillo where more vultures were nesting including a pair of Egyptian Vultures and where Azure-winged magpies came to breed.

Next we stopped at the Portillo de Tietar which is another steep sided limestone outcrop on the banks of the river Tietar and plays host to many breeding pairs of Griffon Vulture. We parked a hundred meters from the look-out point and as we walked towards it we noticed a flock of Long-tailed Tits, Sardinian and Subalpine Warbler and heard a Nightingale.

The vultures did not disappoint us as many were perched on the rocky pinnacles and at one stage over 70 came into view over the wooded ridge. Also on the cliff face a pair of Eagle Owls breed each year and this year they had raised two chicks, both of which were showing well, but there was no sign of either of the parent birds. Rain began to fall whilst we were watching the owls so we decided to move further along the road to view the wooded area, we had excellent views of Golden Oriole and Subalpine Warbler, we also noted Blackcap, Common Cuckoo and Black Stork. The rain then increased in its intensity so we climbed reluctantly into the bus and headed for home. We stopped for coffee and visited the famous Plaza in Trujillo but bird-watching ceased for most of the rest of the day.

At about 7pm the rain ceased and some of the group walked the sodden tracks around the Finca, what a fabulous setting, rural countryside, flower meadows, olive groves, dehesa and lovely hedgerows. Thirty two species of birds were recorded in 90 minutes by one of the group a fitting testament to how good the area is, the best on the list were Golden Oriole, Short-toed Treecreeper, Azure-winged Magpie, Hoopoe, Bee-eater, Red-rumped Swallow, Woodlark, Black and Griffon Vultures.

Saturday 24th May

Our last full day began with an early start, what a surprise! We set off in the dark at 6:30am and headed west towards Casares and after about 30km we turned off towards Santa Marta de Magasca and then left onto a dirt track. We spent a wonderful couple of hours looking over terrific landscapes back-lit by a fantastic pink and red sunrise. The open plains held a great variety of birds and we were soon watching Montagu's Harrier, Roller, Calandra Lark, Great Bustard and Black Kite. Many White Storks paced the dry grassy fields and in our effort to find sandgrouse we discovered Stone Curlew, Red-legged Partridge, Black-eared Wheatear and a very distant Little Bustard. Have made several stops and had walked a fair distance we came upon some Black-bellied Sandgrouse, their distinctive call alerted us, as first a couple of single birds flew by then a group of five, beautifully lit by the rising sun. We then heard the call of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse but failed to find them on two occasions. Another, much closer, Little Bustard appeared and many more harriers were seen before we decided to return to the finca for breakfast. A great start to day was the common consensus amongst the group.

It was 10am before we hit the road again having packed all our belongings and said goodbye to the excellent staff at Finca Santa Marta. This time we headed north-eastwards towards Madrid, after 25km we turned off the motorway and drove through Jaraicejo to an area of heathland found high up above the plateau. From the heath we had tremendous panoramic views, we could see for miles over 180 degrees facing southward. We parked at a convenient spot to view the scrub in search of Spectacled Warbler and within a minute we found one! What luck, the bird paraded itself before us for several minutes before flying up into the air and completing its display-flight before our very eyes. Then a call of "Dartford" went up and we had similar views of that little beauty too, both birds performed very well to the appreciative crowd for the next 30 minutes. Peripheral, but none-the-less significant birds, included Thekla Larks, Linnets, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Woodchat Shrikes, Black Vultures and a huge flock of some fifty Griffon Vultures rising from the plains below us.

We then drove back through Jaraicejo and after a couple of kilometres we found a very scenic spot where three generations of bridges could be viewed as they spanned the Rio Almonte. We parked near the oldest bridge and surveyed this picturesque 'beauty spot' whilst listing some very interesting species of birds. The rare Great Egret

was found fishing upstream below the modern motorway bridge, Crag Martins darted under the old bridge whilst White Wagtails fed on flies amongst the stony river bed. Bee-eaters joyfully gathered bees on the wing announcing their presence with their bubbly chirp and a Nightingale provided the fitting background music. We spent a magical hour there recording 23 species of birds the final one being a Black Stork that drifted effortlessly along the line of the motorway until it disappeared beyond the distant hills.

Time was advancing quickly so we turned our sights southwards passing the outskirts of Trujillo and then Zorita before stopping just north of Madrigalejo at the old station. There we had great views of Roller, Southern Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow and Red Kite, we did not stay long and soon we were passing through Madrigalejo and onto our final stop near the rice paddies at an old bridge over a small river. We ate our lunch sitting on or near the bridge where we saw Common Waxbill having excellent views of a very close-up male. We also saw Great Reed and Reed Warblers, Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler, Little Bittern and we watched a White Stork's nest that held three chicks that were being fed by their bill-clapping parents.



Well it was approaching 2pm and we had a four hour trip ahead of us so off we went. The journey was broken by a couple of stops but was otherwise uneventful, we arrived at Matalascanas at 6pm where we spent 10 minutes looking over the sea from the cliffs, the only bird of note was a single immature Northern Gannet. So that wound up the birding side of the trip, we drove to our hotel to check-in for a single night, the dinner was excellent as usual and so was the ice-cream dessert.

Sunday 25th May

Our last day started at 5:30am when we loaded up the bus, we then had an early breakfast and set off at 6:30am for the 2 hour journey, in darkness, to Faro airport where the trip was concluded.

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