

WINGSPAN BIRD TOURS

TRIP REPORT

OCTOBER 6TH - 13TH 2007

COTO DONANA AND EXTREMADURA

LEADER:- BOB BUCKLER

DAY 1 SAT 6TH OCT

Arrival at Sevilla airport at 19:50 – transfer to Hostal Pino in Hinojos –dinner 10pm

Day 2. Sunday 7th October Breakfast at 8am.

El Rocio 9am - 11am

We visited the laguna and birded from an observation point within the town of El Rocio in good light and hazy sunshine. There were many birds there including a distant flock of Greater Flamingos, Glossy Ibis, Little and Cattle Egret, Black and Whiskered Terns. From the viewing platform we had close views of a singing Cetti's Warbler, Spotless Starlings were everywhere and the whole area was teeming with bird life.

La Rocina – Palacio de Acebron

Next stop was the car park at the Acebron 'Palace', not really a palace but a glorified hunting lodge built to 'royal' specifications and proportions in the nineteen sixties. We first took the woodland walk because 3 coach loads of Spanish tourist arrived at the same time, and they headed for the Palace. The ancient Woodland is the only type of its kind in the whole of the Coto Donana and a walk through it is most enjoyable. There were plenty of birds to see including S. T. Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Common Redstart, Pied and Spotted Flycatcher, Gt. Sp. Woodpecker, Blue and Great Tit, Chaffinch, Blackcap and Willow Warbler all seen with a background noise equivalent to a football crowd (Spanish Tourists).

The heathland that we had to cross in order to get to and from the Palace provide good views of Southern Grey Shrike and a fleeting view of Dartford Warbler.

Acebuche visitors centre for lunch

We drove to the Acebuche visitor's centre to watch at close quarters the antics of the Azure-winged Magpies very entertaining as they came for tit bits thrown by the group. Later during lunch, in the café with large plate glass windows, we watch with amusement a Pipistrelle bat daytime flying!

In the shop area the remote camera was still fixed on the captive bred Lynx, both cubs were by now almost fully grown, beautiful animals. We did not explore the reserve because A. it was very hot by now and B. there was no water in any of the lagunas.

La Rocina

We sought the shelter of a hide at La Rocina to escape the mid-afternoon heat where we watched at close quarters an Iberian Hare. We also saw White Stork, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Little Grebe and Stonechat but nothing new. A couple of Spotted Flycatchers, Blue and Great Tits we seen in the umbrella pines as we walked back to the car park.

El Rocio from the main road

To finish off the day we spent the last hour watching over the laguna of El Rocio from the west side, we had good strong sunlight behind us giving us great viewing conditions. We picked out 5 Squacco Herons in the reeds, Whiskered and Black Terns were hawking over the water and a thousand other birds of many species littered the area in small parties and large flocks, it was truly a magnificent sight and a fitting end to our first day.

Day 3 Monday 8th October

9:30 Laguna Primera de los Palos – Huelva

Today we headed west towards Huelva and stopped at a roadside laguna. Viewing from a raised disused rail-track we saw lots of Mallard, Shoveler, Gadwall and smaller numbers of Teal, Wigeon, Pintail and Common Pochard. Hundreds of Common Coot littered the pool with smaller numbers of Moorhen and Purple Swamphen. The reedbeds and grassy channels held Squacco and Grey Heron, Little and Cattle Egrets, good numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Black-headed Gulls sat or washed in the centre of the water. Cormorants sat on posts drying their wings and behind us in the pines we saw Azure-winged and Black-billed Magpies.

Marisma O'Diel – Calatillo visitors centre

We drove through the unimpressive gas works and oil refinery and onto the bridge over the Rio Tinto looking to our right we could see the replica of Columbus's Santa Maria built in a outdoor museum at the spot where he reputedly sailed to 'discover' America. Passing through the port and crossing the Rio O'Diel we finally reached our destination the Reserva Natural - Marisma de O'Diel, a huge needle of land that lies east west and parallel to the shore, it narrows to a fine point some 20 kilometers from its inception onto the mainland. The whole area is a magical place for waders, egrets, herons, gulls, terns, birds of prey, it is a magnet for migrating passerines and there is often a spring 'fall' when the conditions are right.

At the Reserve centre at Calatillo we found a Red-knobbed Coot in the open laguna and a Common Sandpiper along the shore, other birds present were Gadwall, Black-winged Stilts and Common Coot.

Salt Pans

Audouin's Gull, Kentish and Ringed Plover, Greenshank, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit, Knot, Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin,

Cabeza Alto

Oystercatcher, Whimbrel, Curlew, Spoonbill, Mediterranean Gull, Sanderling, Osprey on fence post with fish mobbed by Magpies,

El Portil – laguna

Gt Crested Grebe, Common Teal, Common Pochard,

Rompido – Rio Piedras

Sardinian Warbler, Common, Sandwich and Little Tern, 15 Wader species, Hoopoe, Whinchat, Cormorant, lots of Whimbrel,

Day 4 Tuesday 9th October - Northern Marshes

Corredor de Verde

Breakfast at 8:30am.

We set off for the short trip to Villamanrique arriving at 9:30am near the town at a site where a small colony of White Storks had taken up residence. We then drove

onto a dirt track and headed into the Corredor de Verde, along the track we saw many Corn Buntings, Greenfinchs, Goldfinchs and Serins, they formed large flocks and fed on the vast quantity of seed heads along the side of the track.

We visited two lagunas the first, Laguna de Quema held a lot of wild fowl and we saw a Kingfisher fishing, it duly caught a fish and devoured on a nearby branch. The ducks included Tufted Duck (3), Shoveler, Gadwall, Mallard and there were also Great Crested Grebes. Along the hedgerows we found Willow Warbler, and Common Waxbill (2) and in the distance we could hear the call of a Stone Curlew.

At the second laguna there were many Tree Sparrows but not much else, driving further along the track we found Woodlark, Crested Lark and a large roost of Night Herons, there were probably some 150 birds in total, they looked like litter strewn along the bushes that overhung the stream. Other sightings along the corredor included Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Zitting Cisticola, hundreds of Stonechats, Goldfinches and we heard several Common Quail.

Rice field harvest

Driving towards Isla Major we noticed a great deal of activity in the rice fields to our right and to our great delight we saw that the commotion was caused by a tractor that was ploughing the rice fields ready for next seasons seeding. There were literally thousands of birds following the plough and their main source of food was crayfish. Hundreds of White Storks were accompanied by thousands of Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, large flocks of Lapwings also gathered as did Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilts, Green, Common and Wood Sandpipers (4), Ringed and Little-ringed Plover and a few Dunlin. The whole sight was amazing and we enjoyed even more when a Black Stork landed on the track in front of us.

Dehesa Abajo

We dragged ourselves away from the rice field and made the short trip to the embalse at Dehesa de Abajo. This made made lake was covered with birds, there were Little Grebe (34), hundreds of Flamingo, Avocet, Black-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt, Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Coot, Shoveler, Pintail (4 only), Great Egret (2), Cormorant (50+), Ruff (4), Common and Green Sandpiper, Purple Swamphen (heard), White Stork (100+), Marsh Harrier (12) and a distant Short-toed Eagle.

Moving further along the road towards Isla Major we saw further rice harvesting on the Brazo de Torre rice fields where we saw White Stork (1000+), L B B Gull (200+), Yellow Legged Gull (500+), Black headed Gull, Glossy Ibis (200+), Black Stork (1) and along the road above us a Booted Eagle drifted close overhead (pale morph). We ate lunch near a Venta and watched the birds in the rice fields.

Northern Marshes – Jose Valverde Centre

Our last destination of the day was the visitors centre found deep in the marshlands along miles of dirt tracks. Along the way we saw a great variety of birds, the centre itself was fairly quiet with all the breeding species having left the huge egret colony found there. We drove along the track that leads back to El Rocio stopping at the gate and the Horse paddock where we saw Tawny Pipit, White Wagtail, Black Redstart, Spotless Starling, Yellow Wagtail and Lesser Short-toed Lark and other species seen along the way were Northern Wheatear (500+), Whinchat (500+), Zitting Cisticola, Green Sandpiper (20+), Common Sandpiper, Lesser Kestrel sightings (20+), Red Kite (5), Spoonbill (200+), GT Flamingo, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Lapwing, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt and Red-crested Pochard.

We took a different route back and it was the return journey that proved the most exciting as we recorded a series exciting raptor finds in a short spell. First a Marsh Harrier then a Hen Harrier and then a Spanish Imperial Eagle being mobbed by Marsh harrier. In the meantime we saw a Merlin dashing across the fields, low-level hunting and even more birds mentioned above we found in several seasonal pools and ditches, an exciting finish to a long day.

Day 5 – Wednesday 10th October - East of the Guadalquivir river – Brazo de Este

We had a cracking 2 hours at a small part of the reserve where we saw large numbers of Spanish Sparrows a flock of Golden Bishop Birds and 25+ Purple Swamphens feeding in the rice field! We also saw Great Egret (2), one in the rice paddie, and 11 Common Snipe with 3 Greenshank feeding in a ditch. Other birds present were: Spoonbill, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Black-winged Stilt, several Green Sandpipers, Zitting Cisticola. We saw our first Barn Swallow of the trip on the way to the motorway from the Brazo de Este.

We then (11am) set off for Extremadura via Sevilla and Merida. The journey was only notable because of Alan vomiting every 50 miles or so (stomach bug). Journey birds were few: both Magpies, Common Buzzard, Red Kite and Spotless Starling, House Martin and Common Kestrel.

We arrived at 3pm in 25 degree and clear blue sky, we quickly settled into our rooms at the Hostal in Trujillo, Alan was still ill so it was just Marion and I that set for Belen plains just after 3:30pm.

We had a wonderful 3 hours seeing many birds and good numbers of most. Southern Grey Shrikes (15+), Whinchat, Stonechat, Northern Wheatear, Lapwing (flocks up to 200), Little Bustard (150+) in one flock and several smaller parties, Great Bustard a single noted early on and then 8 in flight later. Golden Eagle (sub-adult) in flight for 10 minutes mobbed by Common Buzzard and a Little Bustard flew right passed the Eagle whilst it drifted away from us. We noted a good number of Red Kites with 8 in the air at one time. Thekla Lark, Crested Lark, Corn Bunting flew up from roadside verges and Raven, Jackdaw, Griffon Vulture (30+),

Black Vulture (3) gave distant views. Spanish Sparrows were abundant in mixed flock with House Sparrow and Calandra Larks showed in large distant flocks circa 100 birds. Cattle Egret, Hoopoe, Black-headed and Lesser B B Gull, Little Owl, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Zitting Cisticola, Collared Dove and Feral Pigeon made up the supporting cast. A brief sighting of a possible Merlin finished off the trip and we headed back to the Hostal at 6:30pm.

Day 6 – Thursday 11th October - Casares Plains – Torrejon – Trujillo

As it was our first full day in Extremadura we made an early start, so at 8:30am we headed west out of Trujillo full of enthusiasm and excitement towards Casares. We noted Red Kite and several flocks of both Azure-winged and Black-billed Magpies along the way. After about 25 minutes we turned off the main road into a lane sign-posted for Santa Marta then took a left turn onto a bumpy track. Flocks of Spanish / House Sparrows, Corn Buntings, Spotless Starlings and Lapwings were soon recorded. Then small parties of Great Buzzards were noted, some very distant others not so far. Coveys of Red-legged Partridges ran for cover as we drove down the track, a flock of 23 being the largest. We searched the open plains, the ploughed fields and the rough ground for Sandgrouse but we kept coming up with more Great Bustards, a party of 39 was impressive in good sunlight, we did not stay too long in the cold breeze but we had very enjoyable short episodes of quality bird-watching.

A large raptor perched on the ground some distant from the track turned out to be a Black Vulture and the next raptor we saw came drifting over a ridge towards us, using that lazy wing beat and glide that is associated with large eagles, as it approached it was indeed a large eagle as it turned out to be another sub-adult Golden Eagle, not the same one as yesterday as it showed more white on the underwing patches and more white on the tail.

Wow, what a start to the day, soon we were logging the usual fare of Northern Wheatear, Stonechat, Southern Grey Shrike, Hoopoe, Crested and Thekla Larks, Willow Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and an unexpected Dartford Warbler along the fence line. Large flocks of Calandra Lark began to draw nearer until we had great views of them. Then as we neared the end of the track we stopped to look over a freshly ploughed field and put-up 30+ Black-bellied Sandgrouse, unfortunately they landed just out of sight and never returned. Our final flurry of species include a Merlin perched low down on a rock, several Griffon Vultures, Green Sandpiper, Grey Heron, Raven, Crag Martin and Jackdaw, not a bad start to the day.

At the end of the track we turned towards Torrejon el Rubio and stopped at the large bridge that spans the Rio Almonte, there are several generations of bridges to be found in this wooded valley and some very interesting birds too. A large mixed flock of Crag and House Martins were hawking above and below the bridge and a Common Kestrel called loudly from the underside of it. We moved from the car park and walked southwards under the bridge, immediately on the other side we

disturbed a pair of Hawfinches which quickly disappeared into the thicket, a few Serins and Stonechats flitted about whilst a screaming flock of Alpine Swifts came noisily into view above the bridge. They numbered about 40 birds and gave us great entertainment with their acrobatic flying manoeuvres, then as quickly as they arrived they were gone!

We searched the old bridge parapet walls and found White Wagtails, a Cormorant, a Blue Rock Thrush and 3 or 4 Black Wheatears, giving us our target bird. On our return walk we picked up Chaffinch, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and a pair of pale morph Booted Eagles. From the car park we had more Serins, a Common Sandpiper, the Alpine Swifts returned and a few Griffon Vultures drifted high above us.

Next we drove to Monroy to find a restaurant for lunch and along the way we stopped to watch an obliging Short-toed Snake Eagle (3 eagle species in an hour, not bad).

After lunch we continued towards Torrejon turning down several interesting tracks to observe much of the same as before with the exception of a Mistle Thrush. We found many flowering Autumn Squills, Autumn Crocus and Snowdrops.

At Torrejon we turn towards Trujillo and drove 12 km to the large bridge over the Rio Almonte, yes the same river! A few Crag Martins hawked around us, a couple of Grey Herons fished the pools and White Wagtails caught flies at the rivers edge, we enjoyed some quality time in beautiful surroundings, great afternoon sunshine and peaceful tranquillity. Our last stop was in central Trujillo in the main plaza where we watched people and enjoyed a late afternoon beer savouring the moment reflecting on our wonderful day and treasuring our memories.

Day 7 – Friday 12th October - Monfrague Nacional Parque

We saved the best venue until our last day as we set off northwest from Trujillo towards Plasencia, the weather was bright with clear skies with a nip in the air. Our destination was the wonderful Monfrague nacional parque, it teems with wildlife, it has fantastic scenic beauty and there are many walks, tracks and miradors to explore.

We arrived at our first scheduled stop which was the upper car park at the Castillo de Monfrague, the car park was empty, a good omen. There were birds everywhere, most bushes had some activity, we quickly noted Robin (singing), Blackbird, Chaffinch, Blue Tit and Great Tit, then the goodies started to show themselves as we logged Hawfinch, Blackcap, Black Redstart, Blue-rock Thrush, Crag Martin and Red-rumped Swallow.

We began to climb the stone steps up to the Castillo but bird sightings held us up, more Hawfinches flitted about and several more Black Redstarts showed well. At the top we scanned Pena Falcon, the rock face immediately in front and below us. There were over 100 Griffon Vultures perched and several in the sky even though it was just 9:30 am. Then we noted a large bird of prey sitting at the very top, it was

unmistakeably an adult Bonelli's Eagle, what a fantastic find and our fifth eagle of the trip. The eagle sat for ten minutes and it remained unperturbed even when a couple of vociferous Red-billed Chough made feeble attempts to flush it. Then 4 Black Vultures drifted close by, the eagle flew up to them and attacked one, it literally landed on the vulture's back for a split second! The eagle then swooped in a big arc below us, showing clearly its white mantle patch before alighting on the rock again.

We searched the sky for White-rumped Swift with no luck (they had been seen yesterday), having watched the vultures for another 30 minutes we began to descend the steps and as we did so we logged more Hawfinches, a couple of really colourful Firecrests, Blackcap and 3 more Black Redstarts. Returning to the car quite excited about the eagle sighting we drove round to viewing point at Pena Falcon, where there were now over 100 vultures in the sky along with high numbers of Crag and House Martins. Another Black Redstart showed well as did a Blue Rock Thrush just before we left for our next stop-off.

We parked just beyond the first bridge over the Rio Tajo and soon located a good sized flock of Alpine swifts as they weaved their way through the numerous Crag Martins. Overlooking the old Cardinal Bridge we saw more Black Vultures, a large flock of Azure-winged Magpies (at least 50), White Wagtails and more Crag Martins. We then passed Villareal and turned right stopping after passing a group of birders that was staring skywards. We jumped out of the car and quickly got onto another pair of Bonelli's Eagles, can this trip get any better. Once the eagles had drifted out of sight we picked up a distant Red Kite and another Blue Rock Thrush.

It was now time for lunch so we drove into Villareal and found a restaurant where a plate of ham, egg and chips was washed down with a small beer.

Back on the road we drove to the extreme north-east corner at Puerto de Tietar the traditional Eagle Owl site. We left the car some 100 meters from the viewing area and logged a fleeting view of Rock Bunting, along with Cormorant, Grey Heron and more Griffon Vultures. We scanned for an hour in the heat of the mid-afternoon and gave up at 3:30, Alan was still not fully fit so we called it a day and headed for Trujillo taking the long way round via Sentacilla, where we made a fortunate wrong turn and ended up in the centre of this small village. We stopped to get our bearings and noticed about 100 or more Red-rumped Swallows lining the telephone wires, a lovely sight that added a last minute sparkle to the end of our week's birding holiday. During the journey back to the hotel we noted Red Kite, Griffon Vulture and Spotless Starlings.

Day 8 – Saturday 13th October – Extremadura - Sevilla

Our last morning was spent driving directly to Sevilla airport in the dark early hour and so ending this wonderful autumn trip. We had 6 full days birding (better flight

times may have provided birding on arrival and departure days, we logged 150 species with some real goodies to boot, we saw 5 eagle species, 25 different waders, hundreds of bustards, hirundines, herons, egrets, ducks and storks. We saw the spectacle of the rice harvest in Donana and the flocking of the plains birds in Extremadura. This autumn tour proved that the bird-watching can be as good, if not better, than a spring trip and it will be on the Wingspan itinerary from 2008 onwards.