

# WINGSPAN BIRD TOURS

## TRIP REPORT

### EXTREMADURA & SIERRA DE GREDOS

May 26<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup> 2008

Leader: BOB BUCKLER

#### Weather:

Overcast skies and frequent showers dominated the whole week, at times the clouds cleared, the temperature rose and we had pleasant spells of bird-watching. The last two days were spent in the mountains where it was a few degrees cooler and the rain returned with a vengeance we lost a lot of birding time due to very dull overcast conditions.

#### Daily itinerary:

##### Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May



After a short delay, whilst we all met up, we eventually left Madrid airport and headed Southwest for Trujillo. Our first birds were **Common** and **Pallid Swifts** hawking the terminal buildings quickly followed by **Spotless Starling**, we stopped for a picnic lunch about halfway to Trujillo where we had good views of **Crested Lark**, **White Stork**, **Black Kite** and a distant **Booted Eagle**. As we approached Trujillo bird sightings became more frequent and we added **Cattle Egret** and **Azure-winged Magpie** to our list.

We drove through a number of rain showers during the latter part of the journey eventually arriving at our hotel late afternoon. After settling into our rooms at

Finca Santa Marta we toured the wonderful court yards and annexes and then onto the gardens. When we met in the car park the weather had improved and we had bouts of warm sunshine as we set off for a stroll along one of the many tracks. We quickly became acquainted with the sight and sound of the **Azure-winged Magpie** and after a short while we found **Bee-eater**, **Hoopoe**, **Woodchat Shrike**, **Sardinian Warbler** and heard several **Golden Orioles** before catching a brief glimpse of one in flight. Dinner was taken at the Finca, which is a converted olive mill, we were served dinner in the wonderful olive-crushing room where the 19<sup>th</sup> century olive presses are still installed .

##### Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> May

**Cloudy and overcast for most of the day with outbreaks of heavy showers.**

An early walk around the Grounds of Finca Santa Marta produced some very interesting sightings, a large group of **Hawfinches** was the highlight and fortunately they showed well enough for all the group to have good views of



them. We heard more **Golden Orioles** and a **Common Cuckoo**, we had sightings of **Serin, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Linnet** and **Stonechat**. A **Melodious Warbler** sang from a tree-top for all of us to enjoy, whilst family parties of both **Blue** and **Great Tits** moved along the hedgerows in pace with us. Towards the end of the walk a curious sighting was had of a **Little-ringed Plover** in a ploughed vineyard and at the same time a brilliant male **Golden Oriole** showed briefly taking the shine off our little wader.

After being fed and watered we toured the steppe around Santa Marta de Magasca travelling via Trujillo. Our first stop produced a good sighting of a **Great spotted Cuckoo** calling, in flight, then perched on the traditional fence wire. We had excellent close views of **Thekla Lark** and **Calandra Lark**, several **Hoopoes** and **Black Kites** before we set off for our next destination. We parked on a high ridge overlooking many acres of grassland where hundreds of **Spanish Sparrows** were feeding and as we edged our way down a dirt track we sighted our first **Great Bustard**. Although the bird looked soaked it stood very stately and walked slowly and elegantly as it went about its business. An extraordinary piece of raptor-action went on above us as we watched a **Montagu's Harrier** being harassed by two **Black Kites**. The Harrier was carrying a small kill and it climbed higher and higher to escape the bombardment of the kites, but eventually it dropped its meal and one of the kites caught it mid-air and flew off. In the meantime the other kite continued to mob the Harrier.

Other birds of note were **Short-toed Larks, Black Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Common Buzzard** and dozens of **White Storks**. Moving on we drove around Santa Marta and stopped at a bridge overlooking the Rio Magasca on the road to Monroy. It was fairly quiet but we did get great views of **Crag Martins** as they hawked below us showing off their white tail markings as they turned. At the next bridge, that also crossed the river Magasca, we saw more **Crag Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, Cirl Bunting, White Wagtail** and a pair of **Booted Eagles**. We ate lunch there hoping to stay dry during our meal.

The next bridge we stopped at was on the Monroy-Casares road and proved quite productive for us. The usual **Crag Martins** and **House Martins** were visiting their nests under the bridge but they were joined by **Alpine Swifts** which we saw after about ten minutes of waiting. We then searched the rocky river banks for **Black Wheatear** which again proved elusive but was eventually seen well by all the group. Another highlight was the discovery of a **Short-toed Eagle** perched on a rock in the near distance, we had great views.

Our last port of call was a nest site of the **Spanish Imperial Eagle** which was located some 2km down a bumpy track. An adult female stood proud and regal over their chick at the nest which was watched from some distance but we still had enjoyable views. We then spent a good half an hour tracking down an **Orphean Warbler** that flitted from tree to tree giving us short excerpts of its wonderful song. We soon realized that the bird was collecting food and was visiting a single tree to deliver its catch. Well we staked out the tree for a while getting some incredible close views of this usually shy bird. Other birds that we found nearby were **Woodlark, Bee-eater, Turtle Dove** and the very common **Hoopoe**.

## Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> May

**Very cold first thing but a brighter day with some sunshine and the odd shower later.**

Another early start found us driving across the dehesa west of Trujillo towards Casares, we stopped just after the Santa Marta turning and began searching the open plains for anything that moved. There were hundreds of **Calandra Larks, Crested Larks, Thekla Larks** and **Corn Buntings** all making an effort to be heard above each other. **Hoopoes** were very common, we saw one group of five and many pairs, also **Montagu's Harriers** seemed to be everywhere. A line of telegraph pole supported nest boxes that were taken up by **Rollers, Jackdaws** and **Common Kestrels**. A little further along a bumpy track we found **Red-legged Partridge**, a **Black Vulture** in the middle of a ploughed field, two stunning male **Black-eared Wheatears** and a **Spanish Imperial Eagle** sitting on top of a domed brick storehouse! After about an hour we finally found a **Little Bustard**, well just its head protruded above the tall grass, it was making its raspberry blowing noise but could hardly be heard because of the cold breeze and all the **Quail** that were calling.



We were late for breakfast but enjoyed it all the more after a cold start to the day. After our well appreciated repaste we set off south of the Finca passing through Zorita and stopping on the plains near Campo Lugar. There were many birds in the sky including a distant **Black-winged Kite** which unfortunately disappeared far too quickly. We also saw **Marsh** and **Montagu's Harriers**, an **Egyptian Vulture**, many **Black Kites**, several **Lesser Kestrels** and a **Great Bustard** in flight. The local **Bee-eaters** looked resplendent in the bright sunlight and the very common **Hoopoe** showed off its crest to us. Heading back towards the Zorita road we saw several **Collared Pratincoles** in flight so we stopped to admire these unusual gems, they landed not far off and posed for us.

We made a short stop at the dam of the Sierra Brava reservoir where we watched **Gull-billed Terns**, **Black-headed Gulls** and **Red-crested Pochard** on a distant island. There were several pairs of **Great-crested Grebes** and a couple of **Great Reed Warblers** were singing from the reeds on the river-side of the dam. From the dam we could see vast tract of land preparation for rice growing which is now a thriving industry in this part of Spain and it was there that headed for next.



We sat and ate our picnic lunch at the disused railway the rail-track has been converted to a cycle track and nature the picnic benches we saw many **Spotless Starlings** some all kinds of strange mimicry and some well known calls **Golden Oriole!** We also had much better sightings of **grey Shrike** which both sat beautifully on a telephone wire.

reeds on the river-side that were flooded in industry in this part of

station at Madirgalejo, conservation area. Form of which were making such as **Bee-eater** and **Roller** and **Souther-**

We then ventured through the town of Madrigalejo and onto the rice paddies proper, first we stopped at a disused bridge over the Rio Gargaligas where short glimpses were had of **Common Waxbill** and good views were had of **Great Reed** and **Reed Warblers**, also **Cetti's Warbler**, **Nightingale**, **Little Bittern** and **Kingfisher**.

Driving deep into the rice fields near Vegas Altas we got closer views of **Gull-billed Terns** and **Black-headed Gulls** and we eventually found a very good area with lots of birds. A rice paddies recently flooded held a good flock of both **Dunlin** and **Ringed Plover** whilst just beyond them were many **Gull-billed Terns**, **Black-headed Gulls**, a couple of **Yellow-legged Gulls**, a single **Whiskered Tern** and six **Black Terns**. The latter two species were hawking over the water in characteristic marsh tern fashion. Moving on we found more **Whiskered Terns** much closer to the track and several sightings of **Tree Sparrow** were had.

We eventually left that area of the rice field and finished off the day in an area adjacent to the Rio Ruecas just north of Madrigalejo, we saw more **Collared Pratincoles**, **Bee-eaters** and **Hoopoes** and on a bridge overlooking the river we had exceptionally close views of **Kingfisher**. Other birds of note were **Long-tailed Tit**, **Melodious Warbler**, **Golden Oriole**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **Sardinian Warbler**.

## **Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May**

A light wind and scattered cloud greeted us as we left the Finca on our north-eastward journey to the heathland at Jaraceijo some 50 kilometers away. We arrived in less windy conditions and our hopes we high of seeing our target the **Spectacled Warbler**. We stopped along the track a couple of times to watch an **Orphean Warbler** singing from the scrub and a few **Thekla Larks** were scurrying along the track in front of the vehicle. We parked up and walked along a track that led into the heart of the heath and within minutes we had located our target bird. This miniature 'Whitethroat' sang from the top of the gorse and performed its display flight several times for us, what



a star. Not to be out-done a beautiful male **Dartford Warbler** decided to perform its song-flight as well, this one being much closer, you can't get much better than that, thank you very much.

We then drove back towards Trujillo on the old road stopping at a lovely site where three generations of bridges crossed the river Tajo, we parked by the bridge and our first birds were some great close views of **Hawfinch** feeding below us on thistle heads, amazing. Several **Bee-eaters** glided over the meadow and a single **Hoopoe** called in the distance. Near the river we found **White** and **Grey Wagtails**, **Grey Heron**, **Little Egret** and **Crag Martin**.

Next we headed to the newly developed nature reserve at Arrocampo, this area consists of a man-made reservoir, which feeds the nuclear power station and is dissected by a fast busy road, there are several trails leading through the reed-beds and, a recent addition, there are 5 hides to visit. Some of the best bird watching can be had from the side of the road, so huddled behind the crash barriers we scoped the left hand side of the lake. We could hear the buzzing of the **Savi's Warbler** and it took us a good while to actually find one, in the meantime we had logged **Whiskered** and **Gull-billed Tern**, **Purple Heron**, **Squacco Heron**, **Little** and **Cattle Egrets** and we had several views of **Night Herons** as they flew across the road. A **Purple Swamphen** showed sporadically and a **Kingfisher** was seen by just two of the group. We visited three of the hides and added **Great Reed Warbler** to our list and then as we were leaving the area we found a wonderful **Black Shouldered (winged) Kite** sitting on telephone wires not too far from the road.

Our last venue for the rest of the day was the fabulous Monfrague National Park we entered from the north and decided to bird half the park today and rest tomorrow on our way to the Gredos Mountains. We stopped several times along the way to watch birds already listed but our first real stop was Portilla del Tietar the well known rock face where **Eagle Owls** have bred for years. It took quite a while but we finally located an adult sitting in the shade and then a while later we got onto two chicks on a branch in a crevice. Just along the road we found a **Black Stork's** nest with an adult attending two chicks and in the scrub behind us we located **Linnets**, **Subalpine Warbler**, **Rock Bunting** and a **Blue Rock Thrush** sang from high up on the rocks.

We made several more stops as we worked our way to the Castillo and the road back to Trujillo, at one mirador we walked into pine wood and had a great hour searching for **Crested Tit**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Firecrest** and **Golden Oriole**. We found them all but the views of **Firecrest** and **Crested Tit** were not brilliant. We also found **Azure-winged Magpie**, **Turtle Dove**. At the bridge over the Rio Tietar we watched hundreds of **House Martins** and a party of **Alpine Swifts** visiting their nest under the bridge and we saw a **Black Kite** trying to knock down young pigeons into the water, it succeeded and then proceeded to drown the infant before carrying it off!

We next spent a good hour watching the antics of the **Griffon Vultures** at Pena Falcon, a tall limestone pinnacle that housed hundreds of birds. At the base another **Black Stork** was nesting we also saw a **Black Redstart**, **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Rock Bunting**, **Peregrine Falcon** and more **Black Kites**. Everywhere you looked there were raptors in the sky, we searched the hirundines and swifts for the rare **White-rumped Swift** but failed to see any. Other birds of note whilst passing through the park were **Egyptian Vulture**, **Black Vulture**, **Booted Eagle**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and a very distant eagle that could have been **Bonelli's Eagle**.

## Friday 30<sup>th</sup> May

We met in the car park at 6:45am with the intention of visiting the Belen Plains, the sky was full of dull cloud and it was absolutely windless but with no threat of rain, this boded well for plains-watching. Our arrival at 7:10am was perfect as the light was good enough to 'scope' the area, soon we were onto our target bird, the **Little Bustard** and what a performance he gave us. He stood proud and issued his 'raspberry-like' call many times, suddenly he got really excited when another 'raspberry' call came from across the track. This heighten his activity, he would stamp his feet as though running on the spot leading up to a climax when he completed left the floor outstretching his wings to stop himself from falling flat on his face, much to our amusement.

Several other birds were brought to our attention, especially the now, ubiquitous, **Hoopoe**, but also a small group of **Great Bustards** (14) and many **Calandra Larks**. Lots of **White Storks** stalked their prey in the long grass and hundreds of **Cattle Egrets** followed Cattle across the plain looking like white litter scattered far and wide.

This was to our last breakfast at Finca Santa Marta so we took our time, we packed our things and loaded up the bus and we were on our way by 10am. We passed through Trujillo and onto Monfrague National Park heading for Plascencia. At Monfrague we stopped at Penafalcon and found **White-rumped Swift** (3), many **Griffon Vultures**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **Black Kite**, **Blue-rock Thrush**, **Rock Bunting** and several other species. We also stopped in a lay-bye just above Villareal where we logged **Woodlark**, **Orphean Warbler**, **Dartford Warbler**, **Nightingale** and **Corn Bunting**. We watched a known **Bonelli's Eagles** eyrie for a while but there was no sign of activity.

Our next stop was alongside a babbling brook in the Valle de Jerte on the road to Huertas, we ate our picnic lunch watching **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Mistle Thrush** and listened to **Blackcaps**. After eating we walked a short way up a track and had fantastic views of a male **Golden Oriole**. It began to rain but we continued our drive up the mountainside and spent a couple of hours stopping and watching from various watch-points. We noted **Red-legged Partridge**, **Rock Bunting** and one of our target species **Ortolan Bunting**. The rain increased which defeated us, so we retreated back down the hillside and continued our journey to El Barco. One other stop was taken at the car park of the nature reserve at Garganta del los Infernos, we only watched the river from a bridge because steady rain was falling, we watched **Blackcaps** 'flycatching' over the fast flowing water and a family of **Robins** spent sometime just below us.

We arrived at our hotel on the outskirts of El Barco around 5pm where we quickly notched up **Northern Wheatear**, **Crested lark**, **Black Redstart** and **Carrion Crow** all in the hotel grounds. There was still time for a quick hour in the field so we set off driving through El Barco towards Avila, we stopped after a short drive at a large open tract of water meadows. We were soon watching **Spanish (Yellow) Wagtail** and a distant **Nightingale** which was mobbing a **Weasel** that was hunting along a stone wall. The rain increased again so beat a hasty retreat back to the hotel.

## Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May

We met in the hotel reception for an early morning walk which took us up the driveway and onto a lane leading out of town. In the grounds we saw **Northern Wheatear**, **Raven**, **Carrion Crow**, **Crested Lark**, **Black Redstart**, **Stonechat** and **Spotless Starling**. We also heard **Nightingale**, **Cetti's Warbler**, **Golden Oriole** and **Blackcap**. Walking along the lane we found **Woodchat** and **Red-backed Shirkes**, **Great Spotted** and **Green Woodpeckers**, **Corn Bunting**, we had excellent views of **Golden Oriole**. Other birds of note were **Black Kite** and more **Carrion Crows**.

We departed the hotel at 9:15 and headed west towards the Sierra de Gredos parque nacional, passing through several villages along the way. We turned off the main road and headed for the 'Platforma de Gredos' at Hoy del Espinos. A bridge stop was made first where we had brief views of **Coal Tit** and even less views of a fly-pass-**Dipper**. Walking in nearby pine woods we saw a **Red Squirrel** and a pair of **Pied Flycatchers** that were collecting food and delivering it to a nest box close-by. We spent another hour walking the woods and not seeing much, but the cloud cover broke and the sun shone for a short while, this gave the raptors a chance to show. In a short time we saw **Booted** and **Short-toed Eagles**, our first **Honey Buzzards** (3), **Griffon Vultures** and a **Red Kite**.

Working our way up the valley we stopped several times to scan the hillsides, at a stream we saw another **Dipper**, briefly and notched our first **Common Whitethroat**. At the next stop we made quite an intensive search of the scrub covered hillside, we found **Duncock**, **Whitethroat** and **Dartford Warbler**. After about an hour the clouds parted for a short while so we decided to eat our lunch and soon after, with the skies



brighter, our target bird came out to sing, a beautiful male **Bluethroat** appeared not far below us on top of a bush and delivered its tuneful song. What a gem, we watched it for five minutes before it disappeared as quickly as it arrived. We then drove to the top of the valley and parked in the car park, we scanned the steep rocky slopes and produced only **Rock Bunting**, **Spanish Wagtail** and a small flock of **Linnets**, high up on the mountain top we saw **Spanish Ibis** and more **Griffon** and **Black Vultures**.

We then headed down the valley to find our last hotel of the trip, just a few kilometers further along the main road was the Parador de Gredos, a tremendous building on the edge of the pine forest and our home for a night. We checked into our rooms and met in the car park for an afternoon sortie. However the rain increased and put paid to most of the afternoon. We drove aimlessly for an hour trying to find shelter and perhaps an area where the rain was lightest. We saw several species which included **Melodious Warbler**, **Rock Bunting**, **Nightingale** (heard), **Tree Sparrow**, **Serin** and **Black Redstart** but we gave up and returned to the Parador for an early shower.

## Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June

Our last day was well spent, the weather improved as if giving a parting gift to a weary group. We met at 6:45am in the car park and set off for the short journey to the Plataforma de Gredos, fifteen minutes later we were disembarking in the car park at the base of the trail to the Plataforma. The weather improved by the minute, the low cloud drifted away and tiny breaks appeared giving us glimpses of blue sky. Our first sightings were of mammals, **Spanish Ibex**, they fed high up on a ridge, next we saw **Rock Bunting** and then **Dunnock**. As we walked the stone pathway we made frequent stops to look and listen and after half an hour we found a glorious **Rock Thrush** singing its heart out for us. A great sighting and this was quickly followed by a number of high altitude species such as **Bluethroat**, **Ortolan Bunting**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Spanish Wagtail** and **Dunnock**. A **Water Pipit** gave us the run around for a while before we all got good views of it. Now the sky cleared, with cloud and we had glorious sunshine, the first of the whole week! The birds came out to salute it and we enjoyed watching all the above mentioned birds for another hour before we set off back down the mountainside.



Back at the Parador we finished breakfast, packed our belongings and met in the car park at 10:30am for our final couple of hour birding in the hotel grounds. The hotel is surrounded by pine woods with open glades of grass and wildflowers, we walked the glades and notched up an enviable list of species that would whet most birders appetites and would outshine most hotels in Europe. Close to the hotel and nesting in the walls and the main building were **Black Redstart**, **Crag Martin**, **White Wagtail** and **Coal Tit**, in the pines we saw **Goldcrest**, **Crested Tit**, **Cirl Bunting**, **Citril Finch**, **Serin** and **Goldfinch**. Passing overhead we saw **Hobby**, **Red Kite**, **Black Kite** and **Griffon Vulture**. A couple of birds heard and not seen

were **Green Woodpecker** and **Blackcap**.

Finally we had to leave and after loading up the bus we set off for Madrid, our scopes were packed and our list complete so no birding was done on the return journey. We recorded a few fly-overs during the journey which included **Hoopoe**, **Bee-eater**, **Booted Eagle**, **Common Buzzard**, **Griffon Vulture** and **Crested Lark**. We reached the airport in good time for our return flight to London, passing through several bouts of rain along the way, just as we had on the outward journey, we were sad to leave such a wonder place for birding but happy, maybe, to see the back of the wet weather.