

WINGSPAN BIRD TOURS

Bird-watching Holiday

TO



DOÑANA & EXTREMADURA TRIP REPORT

APRIL 10th – 18th 2018

Places Visited

Day 1 Malaga Airport to El Rocio with stops at Laguna Fuente de Piedras – Sevilla – Laguna de Madre de Marismas, El Rocio
Day 2 Coredor de Verde – Quema – Dehesa de Pilas – Dehesa de Abajo – Northern Marshes – Jose Valverde visitor’s centre.
Day 3 Laguna Madre de Marismas, El Rocio – La Rocina boardwalks and heathland – Acebuche Visitor’s Centre
Day 4 Park Natural Marismas de O’Diel – Laguna El Portil – Rio Piedras El Rompido – Castro Marim Marshes and Salt Pans, Portugal.
Day 5 Transfer from El Rocio to Finca Santa Marta, near Trujillo, with stops at Alange and Merida and birding at Finca Santa Marta.
Day 6 Belen Plain – Llanos de Trujillo – Santa Marta de Magasca Plain – Caceres Plains – Embalse de Talavan – Monroy - Trujillo
Day 7 Monfragüe National Park all day
day 8 Jaraicejo ‘three bridges over the Rio Almonte’ – Jaraicejo heathland – Arrocampo nature reserve – Finca Santa Marta trails
Day 9 Transfer to Madrid Airport

SUMMARY:

Spain did not escape the very cold, wet weather that the rest of Europe had suffered this spring, heavy snow still covered the mountains and a biting cold wind dominated our trip with two or three days of overcast skies and rain. The weather system had curtailed bird migration too, very little was moving, all migrants were arriving late, and I guess many will not breed successfully when they do eventually arrive.

Despite all this we had some good days and even in the rain we found some excellent birds and enjoyed some superb birding moments, read on and re-live our fantastic birding experience in both Coto Doñana and Extremadura.

DAY 1 – 10TH APRIL 2018

MALAGA AIRPORT TO COTO DOÑANA VIA SEVILLA WITH STOPS AT LAGUNA FUENTE DE PIEDRAS AND THE MARISMAS DE MADRE AT EL ROCIO

All good laid plans..... went perfectly well today – amazing! My wife Dawn and I set out for Malaga at 6am and arrived with plenty of time to spare for Dawn to check-in and catch her flight back to the UK. I killed some time with a café Americano and tostada, yummy. Then I returned my car to the hire company, picked up a minibus from another company and drove back to the airport at 10:30am.

My first client Gerald arrived early, Carolyn was already at the airport and we all drove round to a nearby hotel to collect Paul. Nigel had cancelled due to a bout of pneumonia, we wish him a speedy recovery. We listed some Pallid Swifts above the terminal building, Monk Parakeets, Spotless Starlings, Barn Swallows, House Martins and Common Swifts (huge flocks of them) at Paul's Hotel.

We all then set off for Laguna Fuente de Piedras, it took just under an hour to get there and it rained all the way. The rain had eased off somewhat when we arrived, so it was OK to walk around, but it was very windy and cold!



White-headed Duck

Water, water everywhere, but too much to bear! The pools along the approached road were deep and flooded, so not many waders were present. Black-winged Stilts and Pied Avocets waded with Greater Flamingos, a Common Sandpiper and several Little Ringed Plovers ran around in the short, wet grass. A few Mallards and Gadwall fed in the pools whilst a single Gull-billed Tern flew over.

Then Paul called out 'Cuckoo' and sure enough it was a GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO, well I never, Paul was on this very trip two years ago and lo and behold he found a GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO at this very spot!!

From the boardwalk and a higher pathway, we saw another Gull-billed Tern, several Yellow Wagtails, Crested Lark a few more Pied Avocets and thousands of Greater Flamingos out on the main laguna.



Black-necked Grebes

The larger of the three lagunas around the back of the reserve centre was the most productive, we heard both GREAT REED WARBLER and CETTI'S WARBLER as we walked round there. The laguna was covered in Northern Shovelers with smaller numbers of Common & Red-crested Pochard, Mallard, Gadwall and the prize find, WHITED-HEADED DUCK.

A group of seven Black-necked Grebes were joined by a couple of pairs of Little Grebes and dozens of summer plumaged Black-headed Gulls were nesting on the little space available on three tiny islands.

From Laguna Fuente de Piedras we drove a short way and stopped for a bite to eat and some caffeine. The journey to Sevilla was quite horrendous, the rain came down like a torrent and the visibility was very poor. During the breaks in the rain we managed to list Iberian Magpie, Montagu's Harrier, Black Kite, White Stork and a few Collared Pratincoles.



Black-necked Stilts at El Rocio

We collected Steve and Robin from the centre of Sevilla which made our group complete and then we spent an hour driving to El Rocio in Coto Doñana. The weather improved, the rain showers were less frequent, and patches of blue sky appeared. Common Raven, more Iberian Magpies, Eurasian Magpie, Greenfinch, Black Kite and more White Storks were noted en-route.

At El Rocio we spent some time birding the large laguna on the edge of town before checking into the hotel. We added Eurasian Spoonbill, Greylag Goose, Red-rumped Swallow and Black-tailed Godwits (some of them in superb summer plumage) to our list.

Our arrival at our hotel was at 6pm. After settling in we meet at 7:30pm for a lovely dinner, taken indoors because it was too cold to sit outside.

DAY 2 – WEDNESDAY APRIL 11TH, 2018

COREDOR DE VERDE – QUEMA – DEHESA DE PILAS – DEHESA DE ABAJO – NORTHERN MARSHES – JOSE VALVERDE VISITOR'S CENTRE.

We had a great day in the heart of Coto Doñana an amazing number of birds were seen with plenty of goodies to keep the group happy. We changed our plans from the original itinerary because of the weather forecast, sunshine was predicted for today, so we headed out into the open marshes whereas rain is forecast for the next couple of days when we can sit in hides at other locations.

We set out in the dark at 7am carrying our breakfast in a picnic bag, by the time we had driven to our first destination, the Coredor de Verde, it was light. The tracks were in reasonable condition, some large pools lay across the track in places but that was to be expected after the down pour yesterday.



Woodchat Shrike

Many birds dashed across the track in front of us we quickly noted Greenfinch, Serin, Blackbird, Corn Bunting and Spotless Starling. A Common Kestrel appeared, and several Black Kites scoured the countryside looking for breakfast. We stopped the bus a few times to watch Woodchat Shrike, Common Stonechat, Crested Lark and more Corn Buntings, lovely bird the Woodchat Shrike!

The river Guadiamar flows along the Coredor de Verde and our first official stop was on a bridge over this river. Cetti's Warblers and Common Nightingales tried to deafen us whilst Serin, Greenfinch and Sardinian Warblers delivered more subtle songs. Two EURASIAN WRYNECKS were 'courting' on a dead tree and gave wonderful views but we tried to find Penduline Tit without success.

Next, we stopped to eat our breakfast and during breakfast-time we found a BLACK-WINGED KITE perched on a pylon, this bird proceeded to hunt over the adjacent fields giving us a wonderful display. Our first walk produced Booted Eagle, Common Buzzard, Common Cuckoo (several were heard during the morning), Zitting Cisticola, Serin and hundreds of Common Swifts, Barn Swallows and House Martins, the sky was always full of hirundines.

At the laguna de Qema we found it quite deserted because of the high level of the water, Great Crested Grebe, Mallard, Common and Red-crested Pochards was all we saw.

Our drive continued along the muddy tracks following the Coredor de Verde back to the main road, we stopped on several occasions and listed more species, such as White Stork, Common Nightingale, Sardinian Warbler and as we approached our next venue we stopped to watch a first year Black Stork that didn't look too well.

Hundreds of Cattle and Little Egrets joined White Storks in the flooded fields, also Grey Herons and Glossy Ibis were recorded. At Dehesa de Pilas (a square eucalyptus wood – nothing like Dehesa) we watched dozens of Spanish Sparrows, a good number of White Storks on their nests and surprisingly Eurasian Spoonbills were also nesting. A few (three) European Bee-eaters flew around us and we caught sight of an Egyptian Mongoose chasing a Rabbit along a hedgerow!

The huge reservoir at Dehesa Abajo was also bursting its banks so, again, bird sightings were few and far between. We did see Black-necked, Little and Great Crested Grebes, Great Cormorant, Western Jackdaw, Greater Flamingo, Glossy ibis and two very showy Purple Swampheens. As we drove the length of the reservoir we noted a few pairs of Red-crested Pochard and not much else.

Everywhere was flooded, every field held some water and the wild flowers were just amazing, we had wonderful light, but a cold wind spoilt our enjoyment a little. One small laguna gave us very close views of a pair of FERRUGINOUS DUCKS, they were so confiding we got very close to them, smashing sighting.



Male Ferruginous Duck

A coffee stop extended into lunch but by 1pm we were on the road into the northern marshes where the tracks were in much better condition than I had expected. A series of sightings had us stop-starting many times, we watched many Yellow Wagtails (*Iberiae*), also Crested Larks, our first Purple Herons, lots of egrets a few Lesser Kestrels and a couple of Marsh Harriers.

Deep into the marsh we stopped to look for larks and found both Calandra and Skylarks, but Greater and Lesser short-toed Larks were non-existent so far. More water appeared, the marshes were full to breaking point and thousands of water birds were enjoying it. Glossy Ibis dashed about in groups of twenty to thirty, single Purple Herons were everywhere as were Purple Swampheens, Eurasian Coots, Moorhens, all three Grebes and egrets including Great White.

I can't remember seeing so much water and so many birds, even the lagunas at the Jose Valverde Centre were full. As we arrived at the centre a dozen Eurasian Magpies crossed the track and a Great Reed Warbler

screamed out its non-melodic song. Whilst enjoying a coffee and watching a huge number of birds through the plate glass windows of the visitor's centre at Valverde we found another FERRUGINOUS DUCK, amazing!

Good numbers of Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, Common and Red-crested Pochards were seen with a huge flock of some seventy Black-winged Stilts and countless Glossy Ibis, Purple Herons, Cattle Egrets and Greater Flamingos.

A short walk behind 'blinds' revealed a few other wading birds, a single Common Snipe, a couple of Black-tailed Godwits and twenty or so of Ruff. We watched another Booted Eagle fly over us as we picked out Pallid Swifts with dozens of Common Swifts.

Further exploration along the tracks in the bus near the Valverde centre revealed several good sightings of Greater Short-toed Larks, a single Collared Pratincole and a few migrant passerines in the shape of Yellow Wagtails, Northern Wheatears, Whinchat and Woodchat Shrike.

Our return journey out of the marshes was somewhat quicker than when we came in, but we did search for Lesser Short-toed Lark and we did see our first Short-toed Eagle, a distant Montagu's Harrier and more Corn Buntings than ever!

We got back to El Rocio at 7pm having seen many Iberian Magpies near the town, it was too late to look at the laguna, we showered and came down to a lovely dinner and nice glass of wine, ah!

DAY 3 – Thursday 12th April 2018

Laguna Madre de Marismas, El Rocio – La Rocina boardwalks and heathland – Acebuche Visitor's Centre

What a day with completely contrasting halves, the morning was fine with nice sunny weather whilst the afternoon, as forecast, was a complete wash-out!



Looking over the Laguna de Madre de Marismas at sunrise

As the laguna Madre de Marismas was just a short walk from our hotel we made a quick visit before breakfast, it got light around 7:45 so that is when we met. From the promenade we saw all the usual species looking great in the morning light, a bonus was the appearance and calling of a Little Bittern, we all got good views of both a male and a female. Also calling were Cetti's Warbler, Great Reed and Reed Warblers, we got brief views of the latter.

A male Garganey was nice to see along with Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Red-crested and Common Pochard. Purple Swamphen, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo and Black-winged Stilts made up most of our other sightings.

After our breakfast we set out in the bus for the very short journey to La Rocina a section of the Doñana natural park. Nearly 4km of boardwalks take you through Umbrella Pine woodland, some dense scrub (algaida) and to a few hides overlooking the La Rocina stream, which today was a huge flooded area.

From the first hide we enjoyed views of Garden Warbler, Blackcap, also brief views of Reed Warbler and many water birds seen earlier. We heard a Savi's Warbler but could not locate it in the dense reed-beds.

As we walked towards the next hide we found a male **LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER**, Common Nightingale, more Garden Warblers and Blackcaps. Just before we walked onto another boardwalk, we found a pair of **LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKERS**. The next section of the boardwalk overlooked another inlet of the stream, we heard another Savi's Warbler but still could not see it. It started to rain, only lightly and whilst we sheltered we found Iberian Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and both Cetti's Warbler and Common Nightingale sang from all directions.



Male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

From the next hide a Savi's Warbler called from very close quarters and it was Gerald who located it first, smashing we all had great scope views of it buzzing away. Woodchat Shrike, Common Stonechat and even more Garden Warblers, Long-tailed Tits, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Serin and Common Nightingale were all seen outside of the second hide.

We abandoned the longer walk because of the weather so we walked back to the bus and set off for the heathland which was found a couple of kilometers along the track towards the Palacio de Acebron. We quickly found a pair of Common Stonechats, then a male Dartford Warbler appeared but not everyone got good views of it. So, we tracked it down as it flew across the road and perched up nicely several times, fantastic little bird. We also logged Iberian Shrike (formerly Southern Grey), a pair of Eurasian Hoopoes, a pair of Common Ravens and two Serins.

The rain came down very hard as we drove towards the coast to the Acebuche Centre, we quickly walked from the car park into the visitor's centre where we decided to take lunch. That was pretty much the end of our birding because the rain and wind had increased by a substantial quantity. Some of us tried to bird from the nearest two hides but it was hopeless. We saw Stonechat, Yellow Wagtail and a few water birds before we abandoned for the day.

It was 3:30 when we arrived at the hotel and made plans for an early dinner, a couple of the group did go back out around 5pm and had good views of the Great Reed Warbler as well as a lot of the regular habitants of the laguna.

DAY 4 – FRIDAY 13TH APRIL 2018

PARK NATURAL MARISMAS DE O'DIEL – LAGUNA EL PORTIL – RIO PIEDRAS, EL ROMPIDO – CASTRO MARIM MARSHES AND SALT PANS, PORTUGAL.

FRIDAY 13TH - started very wet and windy it was pouring down as we went down to breakfast at 8am. As we set off, the sandy streets of El Rocio, were covered in huge pools of rain-water and as we drove down towards the coast at Matalascanas and then on towards Huelva the rain continued to bombard the bus. However, as forecast, by the time we reached Huelva the rain stopped, blue sky appeared, and the sun came out, marvellous.

We made a very brief stop at the small Laguna Primera de los Palos near the gas-works at Huelva, like everywhere there was too much water in the laguna. Very few birds were present: we saw Gadwall, Red-crested and Common Pochard, Mallard, Purple Swamphen, Moorhen, Eurasian Coot and a few Red-rumped Swallows and House Martins. As we boarded the bus a Pallid Swift flew over us very low.

The Marismas and salt pans at the Natural Park of the O'Diel were very disappointing, it was cold there despite the sunshine, 10C but it felt like 5C with a cold wind. Everywhere as usual had too much water and very few birds. At our first stop we saw dozens of Greater Flamingos, a few Black-winged Stilts, a single Pied Avocet, Common Redshank, Common Shelduck, Red-crested Pochard and Gadwall. A Great Reed Warbler sang briefly from a patch of reeds.



One of the many wild flowers - this is the iris-like Barbary Nut

From the visitor's centre we scanned a channel from the car park where a nice number of waders were present: Dunlin looking nice in their summer plumage were joined by Curlew Sandpiper, several Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover and not much else.

Our best sightings were made as we drove through the marshes were of both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, we saw several of the former and a lovely pair of the latter, all very close to the road. An Osprey sat on a post near one of the 'Osprey nesting platforms' and a Common Kestrel was seen a couple of times.

Further into the marsh we added Greenshank, Ruddy Turnstone (looking fabulous in summer plumage) and a few pairs of Kentish Plover. I can't remember a time when the muddy channels were so devoid of waders. The scrub was the same hardly a bird flitted around the bushes and pine trees. Furthermore, the road down to the lighthouse was closed because of repair work being carried out to the sea-defences.

We parked the bus and walked along boardwalk to the beach where we found a bunch of Eurasian Oystercatchers with a large flock of Sanderling. Out at sea we saw several Gannets in the distance, lots of Yellow-legged Gulls, a few Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a few Sandwich Terns. We then left the marsh having more excellent views of the harriers on the way out.



the beach looking out over the Atlantic Ocean

A quick stop to pick up picnic supplies was made before we drove to the large Laguna at El Portil. This was again flooded with very little bird life on it. We saw Little and Great Crested Grebes, Gadwall, Mallard and Red-crested Pochard.

Moving on to the river Piedras at El Rompido we spent some time searching the heathland and the river for more species. Both Eurasian and Iberian Magpies were seen as we passed El Rompido 36-hole Golf Course which was busy with practicing Golfers. The river was in full flood and at high tide, so no muddy margins were present. We did see Common Sandpiper, Sanderling, Whimbrel and a few Eurasian Curlews. We also notched up another Osprey and a Peregrine Falcon which sat on a fallen tree.

The heathland produced views of Sardinian Warbler, Common Stonechat, Serin, but not a single migrant bird. On the way back, we saw Woodchat Shrike and an Iberian Green Woodpecker which perched up nicely for us but at a great distance.

The group persuaded me to drive into Portugal as we were not very far from the border at Cartaya, both Steve and Robin, our American contingent, are collecting country ticks and they needed Portugal for their list! So, we visited Castro Marim marshes and salt pans for an hour or so.



A Brown Hare seen at Castro Marim

Few birds were present, but we listed about twenty species which included our first Stone Curlew of the trip, we also saw Corn Buntings, Pied Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Dunlin, Greenshank, Redshank, Ringed Plover, Common Shelduck, Greater Flamingo, Common Stonechat, Goldfinch, Linnet, Sardinian Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Yellow-legged Gull, Common Kestrel, Spotless Starling and House Sparrow. In the sky above, us large groups of Common Swifts were moving with House Martins and Barn Swallows.



The Bridge over the Rio Guadiana which forms the border between Spain and Portugal

We took the fastest route back using the Autovia and arrived back at El Rocio in just over an hour at 6:10pm. We met for dinner at 7:30pm. This was our last night in Donana tomorrow we head off to Extremadura with 125 species on the list already.

DAY 5 – SATURDAY 14TH APRIL 2018

TRANSFER FROM EL ROCIO TO FINCA SANTA MARTA NEAR TRUJILLO WITH STOPS AT ALANGE AND MERIDA

At Last, a clear blue sky and sunshine all day!! This is the Spanish weather we used to know, bring it on. Still chilly until lunchtime then 20C all afternoon.

Before our 8am breakfast some of the group walked round to the Laguna for a last look and to try to see the Great Reed Warbler that is present most mornings. We all saw the Great Reed Warbler very well and a bonus bird was the Little Bittern again, a pair of them were frolicking in the reeds, the male chasing the female, around every time the poor girl made an appearance he would dash over. They both sat out, showing very well at times.

By 9 am we were on the road heading for Sevilla noting many Iberian Magpies along the road as well as White Storks and several other species. Just past Ronquillo north of Sevilla we stopped for a quick break where we saw our first Crag Martin and Griffon Vulture, also a Booted Eagle. Black Kite, Common Buzzard and Common Kestrel were also seen.



A Blue Rock Thrush unusually in a tree and not on a rock

Our main birding stop was the dam near the pretty town of Alange this is always a great place for a number of species that are hard to find in Extremadura. The dam plays host to a huge colony of Alpine Swifts, unfortunately for us they had not yet arrived in big numbers, but we did see half a dozen. The huge mountain next to the dam produced Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Crag Martin and the scrub held our first Bonelli's Warbler with Serin, Goldfinch and several other species.

We scanned the sky for the Bonelli's Eagle, a pair usually breeds on the mountain and we eventually found a distant bird, all the group saw it in the scope, but it was quite far off. A Short-toed Eagle on a roadside pylon was nice to see it remained long enough for the group to photograph it. We then drove into Alange for lunch which was eaten at a roadside venta before more birding. A male Montagu's Harrier circled on the thermals with a White Stork just as we finished lunch.

The huge lake, (embalse), behind the dam can be best viewed from the other side of Alange so we drove there next. Nothing much was on the lake, Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant and the odd Gull-billed Tern but the rocky slopes around the hillside towards the dam held a lot of birds. Our main target species was the Black Wheatear which was found on the return journey, but we did find Thekla Lark, also some more Blue Rock Thrushes, Hoopoes and a lot of Serins.

As we left the town we stopped at the 'dry' side of the dam where reed-beds surround a small outflow, we found Little Bittern there, Cetti's Warbler, Red-rumped Swallow, Marsh Harrier and heard a Nightingale singing.

Next, we drove the 15Km to Merida and parked the bus alongside the mighty Guadiana River, from where we stood we had great views of the Roman Bridge, which is the longest Roman Bridge still standing at over 700 meters in length. We searched for Penduline Tit along the river banks, finding yet another Little Bittern and not much else. It was now 4pm. So, we made tracks to reach Trujillo, it took just under an hour to get to Finca Santa Marta. I always love arriving there it is such a special, tranquil, place.



The Roman Bridge at Merida with a modern monstrosity behind it

After being greeted by the smiling Laura and her helper Alberto we settled into our rooms and then went birding along the tracks. Considering the time of day, it was alive with birds. We quickly found several Hawfinches sitting out for us, also Iberian Magpies and a pair of very obliging Woodlarks. Bee-eaters flew over, Hoopoes called and dashed about, and Sardinian Warblers made cameo appearances. We saw our first Blue Tit, it was most surprising that after 5 days in Spain we hadn't seen one up until now.

Dinner was taken at 7:30am, lovely food, nice wine, a joyous occasion, a very good night!

DAY 6 – SUNDAY 15TH APRIL 2018

BELEN PLAIN – LLANOS DE TRUJILLO – SANTA MARTA DE MAGASCA PLAIN – CACERES PLAINS – EMBALSE DE TALAVAN – MONROY - TRUJILLO

What a contrast compared to yesterday's weather, today it rained all day off and on, the temperature hovered around 11C there was a cold breeze all day. We had very short spells without rain, but birding was difficult, and it felt cold.

Breakfast was over by 7:30am and we were on the road by 7:45, it was raining but it eased off some 30 minutes later as we approached Belen Plain. The wide-open grasslands seemed deserted, the grass was very short which was to our advantage as we searched for Great and Little Bustards.

Dozens of Corn Buntings lined the fences, with Thekla and Crested Larks, whilst Calandra Larks sat on small rocks or flew around the fields, everywhere birds were pairing up and lots of fights were occurring. We had very close views of a Hoopoe as it called from a roadside rock and a Northern Wheatear sat on another rock looking cold and miserable.

It wasn't until we had covered about 5km that we spotted our first GREAT BUSTARD, a male, it strutted around but had no female to display to! Then a flurry of activity over the grassland kept us engrossed. Black Kites, Marsh and a superb HEN HARRIER came close, a flock of Spanish Sparrows fed along a fence-line and a pair of Iberian Shrikes came close. A distant Egyptian Vulture flew across the plain.

A little further on we found at least four LITTLE BUSTARDS, three males were vying for the attention of one female, we had lots of flight views as well as displaying males, that was great birding even if it was cold and damp.



One of the many Black Kites seen today

Further along the same track we found both Egyptian and Griffon Vultures perched in trees with Black Kites and a Turtle Dove. We watched another Northern Wheatear and then a Lesser Kestrel on a fence-post. During the return journey we found a second Great Bustard, also a male, looking forlorn in the rain.

Another 30 minutes were spent driving along another track looking for Great-spotted Cuckoo without success we did find our first Red Kite and more Montagu's Harriers. The rain came down heavier, so we abandoned our search and drove off the plain.

The rock filled fields on the western side of Trujillo, called a Llanos, was our next destination, the river Magasca runs through the area, usually a babbling brook but today it was a flooded torrent. A pair of Common Kingfishers breed in the bank but today there was no bank, but we did see the Kingfisher as well as Cetti's Warbler, Western Jackdaw and we heard a Common Nightingale singing in the rain, that cheered us up.

Driving up through the grass plains towards the town of Santa Marta de Magasca we spent a good hour looking from various vantage points for SANDGROUSE. I have never seen so many Calandra Larks the whole area was buzzing with them, don't get me wrong, it wasn't just Calandra Larks, there were just as many Corn Buntings, Thekla and Crested Larks, the place was alive with activity and the song/noise was a distraction sometimes.

Finally, we found two very distant BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE, everyone saw them in the scope, but they were far away. We left the area, driving to Santa Marta where we stopped for lunch in a very crowded café/bar, an hour later we emerged half deafened because of the very loud 'locals' who were playing cards and another group of Dutch Birders who had to shout to be heard.

Along the road towards Caseres we found two, and only two, European Rollers! The first looked very miserable sitting on a wire near one of the hundreds of nest-boxes provided for the Rollers. The second was at least a bit active.

Our search for sandgrouse continued as we made our way towards Caseres, we found Red-legged Partridge, Little Owls, Common Stonechat, more Montagu's Harriers and a nice flock of some 30+ European Bee-eaters perched in the tamarisk.

The reservoir (embalse) at Talavan was also flooded with just a pair of Mallards and a couple of Great Crested Grebes, we did see a Zitting Cisticola, without a tail, in the car park. Our journey back took us through mile after mile of grassland and scrub as we headed towards Santa Marta. We passed through Monroy and the Santa Marta before stopping alongside a huge field of short grass which I know is a favoured place for sandgrouse and where we had searched this morning.



The flowers along the tracks were amazing

Over the next half an hour we enjoyed much better views of four BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE and then we found a flock of some 50+ PINTAIL SANDGROUSE. What a great sight, as we were watching them a couple of male Montagu's Harriers flew over and put all the sandgrouse up into the air. They flew off which was our cue to finish the day.

We met up again at 7:15 and drove into Trujillo for dinner, it was supposed to be a lovely evening walking around the Plaza Major watching all the breeding Storks, Swifts, Jackdaws, Lesser Kestrels but the rain stopped all that. We had a lovely dinner and walked quickly back to bus, it was still raining!

DAY 7 – MONDAY 16TH APRIL 2018

Monfragüe National Park all day

Hooray!! a day without rain. From today the forecast is good and as it should be, we had wall to wall sunshine today and the temperature reached a staggering 19C.

It was misty first thing but that soon burnt off and by the time we reached Trujillo we had a clear sky, a bright and beautiful morning. Patches of mist occurred in the valleys along the way to Monfragüe especially at the river Almonte where our first stop was supposed to be, we could hardly see the river, so we gave it a miss.

At Monfragüe we drove up to the top car park at Castillo de Monfragüe stopping at a rock-face along the way. Many perched Griffon Vultures could be seen on the ledges, some were on nests with young birds, we also saw Black Redstarts, Blue Rock Thrushes, Crag Martins, Serins and many House Martins, Barn Swallows and Red-rumped Swallows.

En-route to the Castillo (castle) on foot from the car park we found Short-toed Treecreeper and several common birds but not much else until we reached the top.

It must be hard to beat our most wonderful birding experience once we reached the top because just as we got there a host of vultures took off from the surrounding cliffs and circled all around us, sometimes it felt as though you could reach out touch them they were that close. Dozens of Griffon Vultures were joined by

a good number of Black Vultures and Black Kites it really was magical in the clear morning light. The views of the park and the distant snow-covered Gredos Mountains were stunning, I have always loved this place and this experience.

We moved further into the park, by-passing the main car park at Peña Falcon because it was full, at least 50 bird-watchers were looking up at the vultures compared to just now as we were alone when looking down at the vultures from the Castle! We stopped instead at the main bridge over the river Tajo where hundreds of pairs of House Martins and just as many Feral Pigeons were nesting, a few Alpine Swifts had arrived to breed too.



Serin

Our best sighting from a pathway leading along the river from the bridge was of a Bonelli's Eagle, we could hear it calling from the other side of the river but failed to find until two Black Kites started to mob it, Carolyn then found it perched in a dead tree very low to the waters edge, it flew off across the water to our side giving nice but brief views, the Kites followed it into the woods above us and out of sight.

Several other species were seen during our walk these included: Egyptian Vultures, Booted Eagles and some woodland birds such as Long-tailed Tit (the Spanish subspecies, with a darker plumage and a shorter tail than the nominate race found in the UK), also Robin, Blue Tit, Blackbird, Chaffinch and some Serins.

We stopped for lunch in the only village in the park, Villareal, and ate in the only bar-restaurant open, it was crowded with bird-watchers, but we got served pretty quickly. Our next stop was near the dam at the Mirador de Tajadilla, a Black Wheatear flew across the road on the way, but we couldn't locate another one, several Red Deer showed well and not too far off. From the mirador (look-out or view-point) we saw some Egyptian Vulture perched with the Griffons, a Black Kite on its nest and another Blue Rock Thrush.

Walking across the dam and up into some pine woods we reached another Mirador called Malavuelta, but we failed to add any new species to the list. So, we drove to the Portillo del Tietar another huge rock face covered in vultures. We found Sardinian Warbler and Black Redstart along the way, but the nest site of the SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE was deserted for the second year running.

For about half an hour we scanned the sky and peaks and were rewarded with a sighting of the IMPERIAL EAGLE, but by the time most of the group got to see it, it had climbed to a great height! We also saw our fourth eagle of the day when a Short-toed Eagle appeared over the mountains.

For the afternoon we walked further along the road into a cork oak woodland quickly noting Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, more Long-tailed Tits, Blackcap and many Chaffinches. Despite all the

resident bird sightings there were no migrant warblers except for a single Bonelli's Warbler and the only other migrant species seen were, Woodchat Shrike, Common Cuckoo and Bee-eaters.

Eventually we found Mistle Thrush, lots of Iberian Magpies and we had much better views of the SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE as we found it drifting overhead at a much lower altitude, it was a great sighting of this rare and magnificent beast.



Griffon Vulture

After a quick coffee stop at a bar we set off back through the park but this time we did stop at the Peña Falcon rock face where we enjoyed more vultures than you can shake a stick at! We also saw a Peregrine Falcon, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush but the Black Stork's nests were unattended as the birds had not arrived for the summer just yet.

One more stop was made as we left the park to look for a Cirl Bunting, we heard one singing, however the bird disappeared before we saw it, but as a consolation a sighting of a Black Stork was made.

Back at the Finca by 7pm and a quick shower before dinner at 8pm finished off our day, good food, nice wine and a lively group around the table was a super ending to our day.

DAY 8 - TUESDAY 17TH APRIL 2018

JARAICEJO 'THREE BRIDGES OVER THE RIO ALMONTE' – JARAICEJO HEATHLAND – ARROCAMPO NATURE RESERVE – FINCA SANTA MARTA TRAILS

Our final birding day had arrived, it was another sunny day with glorious sunshine all day and excellent light. The plan was to search for a few species missing from the list and to enjoy the birding in lovely weather for a change.

Just a few kilometers from our Finca an old section of the road provides a nice look-out point where we stopped to scan the rocky terrain for Black-eared Wheatears. We never found one, but a pair of Iberian Grey Shrikes posed nicely, we also saw Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Stonechat and the ever-present Corn Bunting.

The old Roman Bridge over the Rio Almonte is a great look-out point from where you can view the surrounding valley, two other, modern bridges can be seen too. The river was in flood as all rivers in Spain are now, so not many species were visible there. It was bitter cold too, 5C with a very chilly wind. Huge numbers of Spanish Sparrows were on the bridge, the hedgerows, the grass and in the bushes, House Sparrows were totally outnumbered. We saw a couple of Bee-eaters, another Hoopoe and at least three Common Nightingales were singing from the nearby oak woodland.

On the heathland a few kilometers further on we enjoyed a lovely hour or so, there wasn't a cold wind and the sun began to warm us up. Many Dartford Warblers were singing and performing their song flight and before long we also saw our target species the Spectacled Warbler also displaying and singing. Other birds of note were: both Thekla and Crested Larks, our first Eurasian Jay and a few Black Kites.



A male Little Bittern

From Jaraicejo we drove to Almarez and onto the reserve that consists of a large lake, the huge Laguna Arrocampo, which is in fact a water storage lake to facilitate the Nuclear Power Station nearby. There are huge reed beds and scrub where a good variety of species can be found.

Our first stop was on the causeway just up from the village where we saw plenty of species except the one we were looking for, the Penduline Tit. Several Purple Herons were flying around, we also saw Little Bittern, Common Kingfisher, Purple Swamphen, Great White Egret, Little Egret, Cattle Egret and a very showy Savi's Warbler.

The sky was always full of raptors, both Black and Egyptian Vultures, Black and Red Kites, Booted Eagles, White Storks and Common Kestrels were seen. At the visitor's centre we stopped to eat our picnic lunch before walking round to the first hide. Another Little Bittern flew past us as we ate.

From the hides we added a few species but never had a sighting of the elusive Penduline Tit. We added Common Shelduck, Common Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern, Reed Warbler and Cetti's Warbler to the day list. Another two hides can be reached about 5km from the visitors centre so we drove there.

Red-crested Pochard and Black-winged Stilt was all we added to our day-list. It was now 23C but with a cooling breeze and it was 3:30pm. We decided to head back to the Finca and enjoy the gardens and tracks with a relaxing walk, which is exactly what we did.

Nothing of note was seen bird wise, but a few more butterflies were on the wing, we saw Spanish Festoon, Small Heath, Small Copper, Provence Hairstreak, Small White and Small Blue.

Our last supper was very nice and tomorrow we leave straight-after breakfast, so we have no time for birding. Our trip list reached 167, including five that were heard-only, this is about 15 species short of the average figure for this trip, you can blame the very poor weather for that. Many migrants still have not arrived on their breeding grounds, due to the wet, cold weather.

SPECIES RECORDED BETWEEN 10TH – 17TH APRIL 2018

162 SEEN + 5 HEARD ONLY

SPECIES			10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	1		1		1			
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				1				1
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1		1
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	1	1	1					
5	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1		
6	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>			1					
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	1	1	1	1	1			
8	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	1	1	1	1	1			1
9	Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		1						
10	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>	1							
11	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				1		1	1	H
12	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1	1						
13	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1	1	1	1	1			
14	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1	1	1	1	1		1
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				1				
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		1	1			1
17	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>			1		1			1
18	Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		1	1					
19	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1		1
20	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		1	1					
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1		1
22	Great Egret	<i>Casmerofius alba</i>		1						1
23	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
24	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		1						1
25	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
26	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		1					1	
27	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1	1	1					
28	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	1	1	1	1	1			
29	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	1	1	1	1	1			
30	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>					1	1	1	1
31	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>							1	1
32	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>						1	1	
33	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1				
34	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila aldaberti</i>							1	
35	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circus gallicus</i>		1			1	1	1	
36	Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennata</i>		1			1	1	1	
37	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>					1		1	
38	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>						1		1
39	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
40	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1	1	1	1	1		1
41	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cayaneus</i>						1		
42	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	1	1		1	1	1		
43	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1			1	1		1
44	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1						
45	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1		1	1	1	1	1

46	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		1				1		1
47	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1			1	
48	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1		1
49	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	1	1	1	1				1
50	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		1	1	1	1			1
51	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>						1		
52	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						1		
53	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostrelegus</i>				1				
54	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	1			1				
55	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	1	1	1	1	1			1
56	Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>				1				
57	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	1	1						
58	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	1							1
59	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				1				
60	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				1				
61	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				1				
62	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				1				
63	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				1				
64	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				1				
65	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	1			1				
66	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1						
67	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1			1				1
68	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				1				
69	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				1				
70	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	1	1						
71	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				1				
72	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				1				
73	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1						
74	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		1						
75	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1	1						
76	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis o</i>	1	1	1	1		1		
77	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				1				
78	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				1				
79	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	1				1			1
80	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>						1		
81	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles a. alchata</i>						1		
82	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
83	Common Wood-Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
84	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
85	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		1				1		
86	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	H			H	1	H
87	Great-spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandularis</i>	1							
88	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>							H	H
89	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						1	1	
90	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
91	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		1		1		1		
92	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>					1		1	
93	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
94	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						1		1
95	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		1			1	1	1	1
96	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>						1		
97	Iberian Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				1				
98	Great Sp. Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							H	

99	Lesser Sp. Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus minor</i>			1					
100	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>		1	H					
101	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		1				1		
102	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
103	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					1	1		1
104	Wood Lark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>					1			H
105	Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		1						
106	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocoryphra calandra</i>		1				1		
107	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1			1			
108	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					1	1	1	
109	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
110	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	1	1		1	1	1	1	1
111	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
112	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1				1	1	1	1
113	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	1	1	1					
114	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rbecula</i>							1	
115	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	H	1	1		1	H	1	1
116	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>							1	
117	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1				1		
118	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>					1	1		
119	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1						
120	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		1	1	1		1	1	1
121	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						H	1	
122	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
123	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola salitarius</i>					1	1	1	
124	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		1	1					
125	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			1		1		1	1
126	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1		1	1		1	1
127	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>								1
128	Dartford Warbler	<i>Syliva undata</i>			1					1
129	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>					1			
130	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1	H	1		1		1
131	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>			1					1
132	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1	H		1	1	H	1
133	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		H	1		1			H
134	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	H	H	1		1			H
135	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					1			
136	West Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>					1		1	
137	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1						
138	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			1					
139	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				H				
140	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						1	1	1
141	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	1		1	1	1	1
142	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>					1		1	1
143	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			1				1	
144	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>							1	
145	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			1				1	
146	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			1		1	1	1	1
147	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
148	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
149	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
150	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus grandarius</i>								1
151	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	1	1			1	1	1	1
152	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	1	1		1	1	1	1

153	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
154	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolis oriolis</i>								
155	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
156	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		1				1		1
157	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			H					
158	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringella coelebs</i>			1			1	1	1
159	Eurasian Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		1		1	1		1	
160	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
161	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1	1	1		1		1	
162	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
163	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					1			
164	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>							H	
165	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	1	1		1	1	1	1	1
166	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					1	1		
167	Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	1							

BUTTERFLY SPECIES

1	Large White					1			1
2	Small White					1			1
3	Clouded Yellow					1			
4	Spanish Festoon							1	1
5	Small Copper								1
6	Red Admiral				1			1	
7	Small Heath							1	1
8	Speckled Wood							1	
9	Provence Hairstreak								1

MAMMALS, REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

1	Red Deer							1	
2	Fallow Deer	1							
3	Egyptian Mongoose		1						
4	Hare		1				1		
5	Rabbit		1				1		
6	Moorish Gecko		1	1	1				
7	Large Psammondromus			1					
8	European Pond Terrapin				1	1			1
9	Marsh Frog					1			1
10	Common Iberian Wall-Lizard			1			1		