

Wingspan Bird Tours

TRIP REPORT

OCTOBER 18TH - 25TH 2009

COTO DONANA & EXTREMADURA

LEADER:- BOB BUCKLER

PARTICIPANTS

MIKE AMBLER, RITA & ERNIE PARKER, CHRIS & SANDRA WOODRUFF AND ANDRÁS BARTAL

Summary.

A good week of late summer weather with clear blue skies on most days and temperatures in the lower 20's, we had one afternoon of wind and rain, followed by high stormy-winds overnight and as we drove north into Extremadura we encountered another afternoon of rain. Despite the weather we had a great time birding, the highlights being, Bluethroat and Caspian Terns from the banks of the Rio Piedras on day one and Red-knobbed Coot, Osprey, Spoonbills and Audouin's Gull in Huelva later the same day. Donana was bone dry having had no rain since May, however we managed to find many species including Black-winged Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Yellow-crowned Bishop, Common Waxbill, Great Egret, Black Stork, Purple Swamphen, Lesser Kestrel and many more. In Extremadura birding was more difficult with a large area to search, we saw several flocks of Great Bustard and only three Little Bustards! Red Kites were everywhere, we found a group of vultures on a roadside carcass, we found two perched Spanish Imperial Eagles, two White-rumped Swifts and hundreds of Common Cranes.

DAY 1 SUN 18TH OCT

Arrival at Faro airport, Portugal at 9:30 – transfer to Hotel Tierra mar Golf .

Dry, sunny, warm, light breeze

The good mood was set as we walked to the parked minibus at the airport when two **Hoopoes** flew over, an ominous start. We drove directly to Spain and crossed the border at Ayamonte, then onto Cartaya before stopping at El Rompido for our first bird-watching session. We parked at the end of a bumpy track which was slightly elevated and overlooked the Rio Piedras and a large area of salt marsh. We ate our picnic lunch as we ticked off roosting waders, gulls and terns along the tidal river bank and inter-tidal mudflats. What a start we had, eleven **Caspian Terns** were the first birds of note sitting on a muddy bank with some gulls, these magnificent birds displayed their fishing skills from time to time, causing quite a splash as they plunged into the water. We logged several wader species and it was educational to see **Whimbrel** side by side with the much larger **Curlew**. On the saltmarsh we found lots of warblers, mainly **Sardinian** but also **Dartford Warbler** and feeding on berries in the small stands of scrub we found **Blackcap**, **Robin**, **Song Thrush** and **Chiffchaff**, all winter visitors from more northerly areas and we had a brief glimpse of a superb late migrant, a male **Subalpine Warbler**. However the star of the marsh had to be the **Bluethroat**, it took a while to locate them but one individual stood up proud, display its colourful chest pattern of blue, rusty red and central white spot.

The next stop was the large salt marsh at Huelva, the marismas de O'Diel, which comprises of a large area of salt pans, open salt marsh, tidal mudflats, scrub land, sand flats, and, both a tidal river and the open sea. Quite a variety of habitat which supports thousands of birds throughout the year, we arrived just as the tide was peaking, not the best time, but very good nevertheless. At the entrance to the visitor's centre at Calatilla there is a small lagoon which was covered in a selection of wildfowl, **Mallard, Gadwall, Pintail, Teal, Shoveler, Coots, Little Grebes and Moorhens**. We also found **Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Yellow-legged and Lesser black-backed Gulls**.

On the salt pans there were hundreds of **Greater Flamingos** and many roosting **Mediterranean Gulls**. We drove deeper into the salt marsh, stopping from time to time to observe areas of interest. We found **Redshank, Greenshank and Spotted Redshank** in close proximity to one another, a flock of **Stone Curlew** were found on their usual wintering ground and many **Hérons, Egrets, Storks and Spoonbills** were dotted about over the open lagoons and inlets. We found a huge gull roost which contained a couple of hundred **Audouin's Gulls** alongside thousands of **Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, there were also a number of **Sandwich Terns** accompanied by 4 **Common Terns**.

We reluctantly left the marshes and drove through Huelva, heading eastward along the coast road, we passed the statue of Columbus and crossed the Rio Tinto before stopping at the lagunas de los Palos. There we encountered many wildfowl, mainly **Shoveler** but also **Teal, Pintail, Wigeon, Gadwall and Common Pochard**. We also found several **Purple Swamphens**, a couple of **Squacco Herons** and a **Kingfisher** but the star bird had to be a **Red-knobbed Coot**, we only found one individual but that was enough to excite the group and end the first day on a high.

We checked into our four star hotel right on the sea front at Matalascañas, we all had sea views and from our third floor balconies we logged **Balearic Shearwaters, Northern Gannets** and the usual parade of gulls and terns. After a lovely evening meal we ran through the checklist notching up some 75 species on our first day!

Day 2. Monday 19th October Breakfast at 7:30am.

Northern marshes and the rice fields

It was getting light when left the hotel for the drive across to the northern marshes, we set off for the Corredor de Verde, which consists of a ribbon of reedbed and tamarisk on the banks of a man made canal created as a buffer and put in place to protect the Donana wetlands since the Environmental Disaster of 1998. We made a couple of stops as we approached Villamanrique, firstly to watch a huge flock of finches feeding in a sunflower crop, there were several hundred Greenfinches, they were joined by Goldfinch, Serin and Linnet, a lone Song Thrush sat on a wire just a short distance away from us.

Next we stopped in some pine woods to catch up with the Azure-winged Magpie, several flocks of which had flown across the road in front of the bus during the journey. We also found several Chiffchaff, Crested Larks, a couple of Hoopoes and large flocks of Spanish Sparrows. We collected lunch in Villamanrique before heading off along the Corredor de Verde making frequent stops to look at Hoopoes, Larks, Finches, Spotless Starlings, Wheatears and Stonechats.

We visited two lagoons the first, Laguna de Quema held a lot of wild fowl, the ducks included Tufted Duck (3), Shoveler, Gadwall, Teal, Pintail, Mallard and there were also Great Crested Grebes. Along the hedgerows we found many Chiffchaff, an obliging Zitting Cisticola sat on a wire nearby and in the distance we could see Common Buzzard and Red Kite.

At the second lagoon there were several Tree Sparrows, Thekla Lark, Woodlark and an Osprey, several White Storks were seen in the distance and a couple of Marsh Harriers quartered the open fields behind us, after

making an unscheduled return to Villamanrique (stomach upset of one of the group) we visited the final part of the Corredor where a large roost of Night Herons was found. A little further along the road we stopped abruptly to look at a beautiful Black-winged Kite that sat on a roadside pylon, as we emerged from the bus the bird took flight and landed on the next pylon away from us, we all had excellent scope views of this dainty raptor.

We stopped for lunch at a site where large clumps of fragmites grew along a ditch alongside rice fields, our picnic was interrupted by many sightings of Yellow-crowned Bishop and small flocks of Common Waxbill, these recent additions to the Spanish breeding list now breed in Doñana in good numbers. We also watched Marsh Harrier, White Stork, Spoonbill and a single Black stork from the reedbed.

We next drove into the northern marshes en-route to the Jose Valverde centre along dusty, bumpy tracks, making many stops to observe the wildlife. Our first stop was on the edge of the marshes to view a large rice paddy that had just been harvested. The area was full of birds, large flocks of Spanish Sparrows whizzed and whirled in and out of the field, as did Spotless Starlings, there were huge numbers of Lapwing, Cattle and Little Egrets. White Storks abound, they were joined by a couple of Black Storks, several Common Snipe were found and a couple of Green Sandpipers got up nearby.

Deeper into the marshes the main interest was raptors, we found one or two on almost every pylon, two more Black-winged Kites showed well and many Lesser Kestrels were settled on the pylons. We found a number of larks along the route with several large flocks of Calandra Lark, many Crested larks and small parties of Lesser Short-toed Larks flew up from near the track, there were also good numbers of Northern Wheatear and White Wagtails found. We visited the Jose Valverde centre where we were surprised to find a good amount of water but not many birds, so we had a cool drink and set off along a different track on our way home. Again we stopped many times, we had great close views of Red Kite and a Short-toed Eagle, we found our first Common Cranes, we watched many harriers including Hen Harrier as we made our final stop in the wilderness.

We spent the next hour driving back to civilisation passing through farmland and pine woodland before arriving back at El Rocio where we stopped to look at the town from the main road. The usual, beautiful vista of a large open lagoon with the lovely town and church in the background had gone because the area had completely dried out! However, a small puddle in the middle held several species, these included White and Yellow Wagtail, Common Snipe, Common Sandpiper, Common Ringed Plover, a few Greylag Geese and in the distance many Lapwings were joined by two Golden Plover.

We arrived back the hotel with time to relax before our dinner, this time was spent sea watching by some of us and we were rewarded with sightings of Cory's Shearwater as well as the usual gull count. Another fantastic sunset accompanied us at dinner, strong red, crimson and yellow light streamed in through the windows as we tucked into our delicious food.

Day 3. Tuesday 20th October.

Isla Mayor and the East Bank of the river Guadalquivir

We awoke to another lovely morning of bright blue sky and a colourful sunrise and after another superb breakfast we set off for to visit the Rice Paddies of Isla Major in the northern marshes, the weather forecast was not that good and we expected rain later in the afternoon. Our first stop was on a track at the edge of the marshes where a good number of birds were feeding on a rice field that had just been cropped. A large flock of Lapwings were joined by White Storks, Little and Cattle Egrets and two Black Storks. Huge flocks of Spanish Sparrows were spending time flying in and out of the field sometimes alighting on the telegraph wires near-by, they were joined by Spotless Starlings in large numbers too. We also picked up Meadow Pipits, White Wagtails, Common Snipe and Green Sandpiper. Moving on we drove into the rice paddies proper, where a lot of human activity, in the form of farmers, was attracting huge numbers of birds. Many fields were covered in gulls, egrets and storks and others were being actively worked on, specially designed tractors were either ploughing or harvesting the rice. The tractors were being followed by a variety of the birds, mainly gulls and egrets, it was a lovely sight to

see so many birds in each field. We made several stops to watch the rice harvest spectacle and eventually caught up with Great Egret, Glossy Ibis (up to a thousands birds in one field), more Black Storks and everywhere we looked Marsh Harriers were quartering the fields. The wind had picked up and brought some dark clouds with it so we retreated to a wooded area to eat our lunch, finding Chaffinch, Black Redstart and Great Tit whilst we ate.

The afternoon was spent on the east bank, we crossed the river at Coria on a small ferry and travelled to Brazo de Este along small roads and dirt tracks. The wind got worse and brought some light rain with it so most of our birding was confined to the bus or not far from it. We saw some good species and adding a few unexpected birds to the list. Both Squacco and Purple Heron were supposed to be sunning themselves in Africa but we found both species. We also saw many Purple Swampheens, more Yellow Crowned Weavers, Spoonbills, Avocets and thousands of Glossy Ibis. The weather deteriorated so we beat a retreat and headed back to Donana via Sevilla arriving back at the coast at 7pm in high winds.

Day 4 – Wednesday 21st.October

An overnight storm had swept across the country but did not produce a great sea-passage this morning, a few Sanderling ran along the beach a solitary Audouin's Gull joined the roosting Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The morning was calm and bright as we set off for the long journey to Extremadura, we planned to look at a couple of places in Donana before heading north. We passed right through the town of El Rocio and spent some time at the stream near the track that led into the National Park. We found the obligatory Hoopoe, we saw a Kingfisher, many Chiffchaffs and heard a Cetti's Warbler. Next we spent a hour or so at the Botanical Gardens near Aznalcazar, where we found a Night Heron, more Chiffchaffs, finches and sparrows.

We then set off for Sevilla and the drive up to Extremadura, the now-completed motorway made short work of the trip and after stopping for coffee and to pick up lunch we found ourselves just south of Merida at 1pm where we stopped to eat our lunch. Several Red Kites passed overhead whilst we ate, a couple of Thekla Larks fed in the car park and small flocks of Spanish Sparrows chirped nearby. The next hour was spent passing around Merida before passing through more rice paddies and open fields. Small flocks of Common Cranes were now appearing in roadside fields, their numbers increased after very mile we travelled. WE stopped at a an old bridge near to Vegas Altas where we saw Cetti.s Warbler, lots more Cranes, Common Buzzard and Red Kites. Next we stopped at the dam at the Embalse Sierra Bravo, an area hot in the current news as the building of a new power station and all its power lines is proposed nearby which will greatly affect the wintering grounds of over 11,000 Common Cranes. On the water there were literally thousands of birds, mianly Mallard but also grebes, Common Pochard, Wigeon, Shoveler, Pintail and Grey Heron. On the other side of the dam we had great views of a Red Kite as it hunted below us, the bird was just as stunning from above as it was from below. We made the final leg of journey and arrived at Finca Santa Marta in time to settle in and get ready for dinner.

A little mishap with the booking, (we weren't expected for another day), meant that we had to eat out, so we drove to Trujillo and ate in a restaurant that overlooked the Plaza Mejor. We all enjoyed a lovely meal but looked forward to a good night's sleep.

Day 5 – Thursday 22nd October

The morning was chilly as we took a short pre-breakfast walk. Lots of Song Thrushes were flitting about we also noted a fair amount of Robins, Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs. The hedgerows along the disused 'main road' were full of Blue and Great Tits, several Sardinian Warblers but not the expected Hawfinches that were usually present there.

After breakfast we made the short journey to the Belen Plain in search of bustards, sandgrouse and larks. The weather had improved, we had large areas of blue sky, no wind but a large dark cloud hovered ominously on the horizon. Once through the village we dropped onto the beginning of the plain and notched up several Hoopoes, lots of Lapwing, dozens of Calandra Larks, Skylarks and hundreds of sparrows. It wasn't long before we latched onto a distant flock of Great Bustards feeding in a distant valley and over next couple of hours we saw them in

flight and I small feeding flocks, we counted at least 50. The Little Bustard was much more elusive and on that visit we failed to locate any. A nice surprise was a Tawny Pipit feeding on the side of the road and lots of Hoopoes. Griffon and Black Vultures patrolled the fields, as did Red Kites, Marsh and Hen Harriers and Common Buzzards. Lots of Common Ravens were joined by Jackdaws and large flocks of Spotless Starlings. We then drove back into Trujillo and stopped at a road side café to take on board some caffeine, etc. Then we stopped at the supermarket to replenish our picnic supplies before heading eastward towards Casares. After passing through Trujillo town centre we stopped at an old bridge just before the new motorway junction. We ate our lunch watching Chiffchaffs fly-catching, Kingsfishers fishing, Crayfish and Terrapins loafing around. We moved onto towards Casares, turning off the main road at the Kilometer 31 marker and headed towards Santa Marta. Then we took a left onto a dirt track that lead us across the plains towards Casares once more. We made lots and lots of stops along this track to try to find more Bustards and only succeeding in finding the Great variety. In our endeavours we had plenty of good bird-watching, the best of which was when we found a group of Vultures on a road-side carcass. The deep sheep attracted both the Griffon and the Black Vulture and we spent some interesting and educational time watching their antics and the developing 'pecking' order.

Later we arrived at the large bridge that spanned the Rio Almonte along the Casares to El Rubio road. We searched for and found, Black Wheatears, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins, Serins and plenty of Linnets and Goldfinches. One highlight was the sighting of a superb male Hen Harrier as it drifted over-head, it looked great in the bright afternoon sunlight.

Day 7 – Friday 23rd October

Today we spent the whole day in and around Monfrague National Park where we had some delightful sightings and some lovely weather. The first place we stopped was another bridge that spanned the Rio Almonte on the Trujillo – El Rubio road. The weather was warm and windless which made for a very pleasant time. We logged the usual Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Common Sandpiper, Crag Martin at the river and watched Azure-winged Magpies and plenty of Common Cranes along the way.

We made a special detour to look for Spanish Imperial Eagles and we were very lucky to catch up with a pair at a nest site just outside El Rubio. Both birds performed well to a delighted group and for most of them it was the bird of the trip. Finally we arrived at the Castillo de Monfrague where we ate lunch whilst watching vultures and kites all around us. We climbed the steep steps up to the castle and spent an hour or so in very pleasant sunshine watching vultures. On the way down a shout of 'swifts' went up but most of us missed the birds and was not until we were back at the car that we all saw the swifts properly. They were White-rumped Swifts, a great find at any time, but especially good for late October!

We stopped at Peña Falcon, to look at Peregrine Falcon, Crag Martin, Blue-rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Rock Bunting and Grey Wagtail. At Villareal we stopped for coffee and ice-creams before moving on to the pine woods just above the dam. We walked through the woods and found Great-spotted Woodpecker, we had several views of Crested Tits, we saw more Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps, Chaffinches and Vultures. At the far end of the park we searched the Portilla de for the resident Eagle Owl which failed to show. We picked up another brief view of Rock Bunting and better views of Blue-rock Thrush, Raven, Vultures and Little Egret. Our last walk was through the dehesa on the outskirts of the park, it was very quiet until we caught up with a mixed flock of foraging birds. To our great delight we found Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Mistle Thrush and plenty of Chiffchaffs. Well what a great finish to the day we were tired but happy as we made the long journey back to the finca for dinner.

Day 7 – Saturday 24th October

We made our second visit to the Belen Plain and a last attempt to locate the Little Bustard, unfortunately it was the weekend and there were many hunters on the plains with guns and dogs. We once again found small flocks of Great Bustard and the usual Hoopoe, Little Owl, Lapwings, corn Buntings, sparrows, finches and larks. Finally after an hour or so we latched onto 3 Little Bustards as they flew over and away from us, not a very satisfactory sighting but a tick, nevertheless.

We then drove across the plains to the main road which took us to Torrecillas de la Tieta where we stopped to pick up lunch supplies before driving back up to the motorway at jcn 240. We drove for 8km and left at jcn 232 and followed the road towards Jaraicejo, stopping where three generations of bridges spanned the Rio Almonte. We spent a lovely couple hours watch from the old bridge where we logged over 25 species! Fleeting views were had of Cirl Bunting but excellent sighting were made of Rock Sparrow, Kingfisher, Green and Common Sandpiper, Grey Wagtail, Serin, Black Redstart, Southern Grey shrike and lots of finches. We ate our picnic at the new tables provide just above the bridge, warmed by the midday sunshine.

Our next stop was above the town of Jaraicejo on the heathland where we spent an hour looking for warblers and larks. We caught up with many Thekla Larks and Dartford Warblers but dipped on the Spectacled Warbler. So we move on to our last site of the day, the Embalse de Arrocampo. The drive was very pleasant as we kept to 'old' E90 which was deserted and allowed us to stop whenever we liked. One such stop was to look for a Rock Bunting perched on top of a small pine at the side of the road, only the driver saw it so the rest of the group disallowed it!

The clouds finally caught with us and the sunshine disappeared but it remained dry. At the embalse there were many fishermen so close viewing of any species was out of the question and to make matters worse all the hides were locked shut and the visitor's centre was closed for siesta! We trooped along the tracks and viewed the water from beside the hides, lots of Common Pochard were there with Shoveler, Cormorant, Great-crested Grebe, Purple Swamphen and Great Egret. On the tracks there were Thekla and Crested Larks, Meadow Pipits, Zitting Cisticola, finches and sparrows. Time was running out and daylight was waning so we called it a day and loaded up the bus and set off back to the finca for dinner.

Day 8 – Sunday 25th October

Our last morning had arrived and oh so quickly. We planned a quick dash to the plains area near Santa Marta de Magaascar to have one final search for Little Bustards which proved fruitless. So we set off for Madrid and a late afternoon flight and also a visit to El Pardo a huge parkland area on the northern side of the city. We ate our lunch there but we found the park absolutely packed with visitors, the good weather worked against us this time. We failed to add any new species so we set off for the final leg, Barajas Airport. We arrived without delay and made our farewells in the departure lounge as we all set off in different directions.