

Wingspan Bird Tours

Extremadura, Central Spain.

22nd - 29th May 2006

Leader: Bob Buckler

Participants, Gill and Neil Smith, Peter Coley, Paul and Yvonne Villalala, Brian and Joan Wollen.
Weather:

Bright sunny days with fluffy white clouds prevailed throughout the week, the first few days were quite windy but the wind eased off as the week progressed. The last two days were spent in the mountains where it was a few degrees cooler and the breeze returned to take the edge off the unpleasant heat. Early morning excursions always required fleeces but it was never too cold to enjoy the fantastic bird watching.

Itinerary:

Day 1 Monday 22nd May



We left Madrid airport and headed Southwest for Trujillo just after midday. Our first birds were **Common Swifts** hawking the terminal buildings quickly followed by **Spotless Starling** and **Collared Dove**. We stopped for refreshments along the motorway where we saw our first **Booted Eagle** soaring high above us, one or two **Common Buzzards** were also noted. As we neared Trujillo **White Storks** were becoming a common sight as they attended their huge stick-nests, along with **Cattle Egrets** and **Black Kites**. We pulled off the motorway at Almaraz and headed for the Laguna Oropesa near the power station. The was quite a strong wind on the causeway but we managed to notch up a few species, **Purple** and **Grey Herons**, **Cattle Egrets** and **Little Bittern** were all seen a number of times in flight whilst **Purple Swamphen**, **Great Reed Warblers** showed very briefly. We heard **Cetti's**, **Reed** and **Savi's Warblers** but the windy conditions kept them low down in the scrub.

Our next stop was an area of heathland near Jareiago where we saw our first **Azure-winged Magpies**, a species much sought after by the group and one that proved to be very common throughout the trip with flocks up to 50 in some places. We stopped on the heath and soon found our target species as both **Spectacled** and **Dartford Warblers** showed very well. The ubiquitous **Crested Lark** and **Corn Buntings** were added to the list as were **Black Stork** and **Raven** both seen distantly high in the sky.

We eventually arrived at Finca Santa Marta early evening and after a quick tour of the gardens and out buildings we settled into our rooms for a relaxing break with a very civilized tea and cake party. Later we took a pre-dinner walk along one of the many quiet tracks



Day 2. Tuesday 23rd May

An early start found us on the plains near Belen at 6:30 am. and what a great start, within half an hour we had sorted out the larks, after watching **Crested**, **Thekla**, **Calandra** and **Greater Short-toed Lark**. We saw numerous parties of **Great Bustard**, a group of 8 were feeding not far from the roadside and showing very well. Male **Little Bustard's** were blowing raspberries at us from the longer grass and everywhere the sky held, raptors, larks and hirundines.

We found 2 **Great-spotted Cuckoos** along a fence line, we had numerous sighting of **Hoopoe, Stonechat, Black Kite, Common Buzzard, Red Kite, Common Kestrel, Lesser Kestrel, Cattle Egret, White Stork** and the ubiquitous **Corn Bunting** sang from every conceivable song post.

But the real highlight was the appearance of 2 **Black-winged Kites**, both giving wonderful displays as they hovered, glided and dropped like stones onto some unsuspecting prey. Later they both perched, giving us ample time to admire their wonderful plumage, red eyes and yellow legs, what an elegant bird. Another beauty was a melanistic **Montagu's Harrier**, instead of the usual black, grey and white plumage this bird was completely black. A **Little Owl** stared at us from a pile of stones as we set off back for breakfast.

After being fed and watered we toured the steppe around Santa Marta de Magasca setting off via the pond in Trujillo. At the pond we found 150+ **Cattle Egrets**, **Little Grebe, White Wagtail** and lots of Pond Terrapins.

On the steppe we saw many raptors, in fact, the sky was full of them! **Montagu's Harriers** were everywhere with a total of 16 found in one small area. Other sightings included both **Kites, Booted Eagle**, both **Kestrels**, both **Common** and **Honey Buzzard** and innumerable **White Storks**.

Driving a little further on we saw the two Shrikes of the area, **Woodchat** and **Southern Grey**, giving good views as they perched on the low power lines, a distant **Roller** was also found, again on the power lines, but the heat haze distorted our view and lessened our enjoyment of this gem.

At the bridge over the Rio Almonte near Monroy we patiently waited for a sighting of our star bird of the day, **Black Wheatear**. It kept us waiting for quite a while but meanwhile we were entertained by, **Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow** and we had very close encounters with **Alpine Swifts** that were breeding below the bridge. A party of **Serins** fed on the abundant flower heads across the river from us.

We headed back to the Finca, taking the scenic route via Trujillo because the driver took a wrong turning, however this route proved fruitful as we stopped at another bridge and found **Little-ringed Plover** and a party of **5 Pallid Swifts** that were wheeling and calling in and around the bridge. We returned happy, hot and tired.

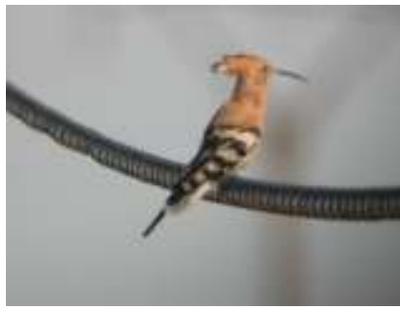
Day 3. Wednesday 24th May

An early walk around the Grounds of Finca Santa Marta produced some interesting sightings. A small group of **Hawfinches** was the highlight, unfortunately they did not show well enough for all the group to have good views of them. A **Sardinian Warbler** sang from a dead tree for all of us to enjoy, (not the song, just the bird) whilst family parties of both **Blue** and **Great Tits** moved along the hedgerows in pace with us. An **Egyptian Vulture** flew over and we all had great views of a singing **Hoopoe** just before returning for breakfast.



The rest of day was spent roaming the rice paddies south of the Finca, we had excellent views of a female **Great Bustard** and we all enjoyed closer views of **Calandra Lark**. We stopped at the dam of the Embalse Sierra Brava and spent a fabulous bird watching hour. There were large flocks of distant **Mallard**, groups of both **Black-necked** and **Great Crested Grebe** and many Eurasian **Coots**. A very distant pair of **Little Terns** and one or two **Black-headed Gulls** lingered in the far distance. Below the dam on the outlet side we heard **Great Reed Warbler** and had fantastic views of a male **Marsh Harrier** as it quartered the fields below us. Two **Egyptian Vultures** gave a low fly pass, whilst **Jackdaws** and **Ravens** mobbed any raptor in sight. As we left the dam 4 **Gull-billed Terns** gave a fly – pass as if to say farewell and thanks for coming.

The rice paddies just south of Madrigalejo offered roadside views of feeding **Spoonbills, Little Egrets, Black-winged Stilts** and **White Storks**. Distant **Collared Pratincoles** dozed on the embankments but the heat haze hampered our viewing of these spectacular beasts.



We continued south and spent an hour on top of a disused bridge to view a reed-strewn river, as we unloaded from the bus a loud, very close, **Great Reed Warbler** sang out, drowning out all other bird song., we all got full views of this ‘megaphone-mouthed’ bird.

Eventually we added **Nightingale, Reed Warbler, Cetti’s Warbler** to our day list and we all had a glimpse of a flying **Little Bittern** as it dived for cover 50 meters upstream. The sky was pretty good too, **Roller, Golden Oriole, Hoopoe** flew over us and a stunning **Short-toed Eagle** hovered nearby, it landed on the hillside and spread its wings as if ‘anting’.

Moving onto the fields around Vegas Altas we got good close views of a **Roller** as it perched on the power lines, we watched a **Hoopoe** singing from a chimney pot, characteristically nodding its head as it uttered its 3 notes, it was as if the bird was using the chimney to amplify the sound. A bird in the bush turned out to be a **Tree Sparrow** and roadside “bouncing birds” were the fairly common **Zitting Cisticola**. By now the temperature approached 30 degrees so we retreated to our haven and enjoyed an afternoon siesta.

Day 4. Thursday 25th May

We assembled in the darkness at 6 am for our early excursion to the famous Montfrague national park, **Scops Owls** called as we left the Finca grounds and a **Black - crowned Night Heron** flew past the bus a few kilometers into the journey. We arrived at Portilla del Tietar just as the sun came up, in great anticipation we searched the rock face hoping to catch the **Eagle Owls** before they went to bed. Alas we missed them, **Griffon Vultures** were everywhere and a suitably placed **Black Stork’s** nest allowed us to observe the two chicks inside. **Nightingales, Blue Rock Thrush, Subalpine Warbler, Serin** and **Rock Bunting** were the pick of the rest of our sightings.

We drove back into the centre of the park and had brunch at the Mirador de la Tajadilla, there we saw a “flying barn-door” – the **Black (monk) Vulture** - it gave excellent views as it soared alongside the smaller **Griffon Vultures**, a flyby **Hawfinch** and a pair of voracious **Ravens** were other birds of note. As we headed towards Villareal we stopped along the road when someone in the back of the bus spotted a **Black-eared Wheatear** and later, a timely break at a known **Bonelli’s Eagle** nest site was very fortuitous. In very windy conditions the distant eerie was located and an adult bird was in attendance, after a few minutes this magnificent eagle flew off, within seconds it gained incredible height on the thermals and was lost to sight. If we had arrived a few minutes later we would have missed it completely.



We lunched at the information centre at Villareal and then returned to Portilla del Tietar and was immediately rewarded with fantastic views of **Spanish Imperial Eagle** as an adult bird fed its chicks, the male bird chased off prospecting vultures and perched on the cliff face in full view. At a spruce plantation just above the Tietar dam we heard and saw a **Great-spotted Woodpecker** as it responded to imitation drumming. Many **Turtle Doves** were calling and a **Blackcap** eluded us as we failed to locate it but **Golden Orioles** were eventually tracked down.

Our final destination of the day was Pena Falcon and the Castillo de Montfrague. At the Pena we saw another **Black Stork’s** nest with two chicks and there were many **Griffon Vultures** soaring above the impressive rock formation. After climbing the dreaded steps up to the Castillo we were rewarded with stunning panoramic views of the surrounding park. A singing **Black Redstart**, close up **Crag Martins** and an obliging **Rock Bunting** entertained the group. Our star bird was however, the **White-rumped Swift**, we managed to see 5 of these sought after rare breeding birds. Another excellent find was the Two-tailed Pasha, a very large butterfly which was holding territory around the Castillo. The late afternoon heat eventually drove us back to bus for our return home and a well deserved siesta.

Back at the finca we were treated to very close views of a number of species as they came to a puddle in the garden. They either drank, bathed or collected mud for nest building, Swallows, two varieties, would arrive with their beaks filled with dried grass, they then mixed this with mud and carried the mixture off for nest building. **Serins, Crested Lark, Azure-winged Magpie, Linnet, Goldfinch, Corn Bunting, Chaffinch, Blackbird, House Martin, Spanish & House Sparrow** and **Great Tits** also enjoyed the little oasis.



At 6 pm some of the group made a dash to the Belen Plains to seek out an extremely rare visitor to Spain – a **Northern (Waldrapp) Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*)**. After taking a short cut, we arrived half an hour later than we would have, had we taken the long way round (so much for Spanish Maps). However we had a great time watching the **Ibis** as it flew off mobbed by **Jackdaws**, it later returned with an entourage of about 40 birds all intent on making life for the **Ibis** uncomfortable. It eventually settled at the roost site, perched high in full view, a great sight silhouetted against a setting sun.

Northern Bald Ibis

The **Northern Bald Ibis** is globally endangered, with a wild population falling as low as 50 pairs in 1997. Today, following successful conservation efforts the population stands at approx. 100 pairs and during 2004, 98 pairs raised 115 chicks. The main population breeds in Morocco in the Souss Massa National Park so we were very privileged to see such a rare bird in central Spain (even if the bird is so ugly).

We had a marvelous hour seeing most of the plains specialties again, **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, both **Bustards**, **Calandra Lark** and many raptors filled the sky. We decided not to take the short cut back.

After dinner we ventured down the entrance track of the Finca to look for the calling **Scops Owl**, some of us got a brief view of one. As we stood listening to the Scops a **Long-eared Owl** began calling from a copse behind us.



Day 5. Friday 26th May

Another early start, we made a pre-breakfast visit to the Steppe near Casares. As the sun rose it banished the chill from the air and the colour came back to our faces as well as to the landscape. We saw at least 5 **Rollers** and had good views of **Great Bustard**, there were 30+ **Montagu's Harriers** in the vicinity with another melanistic bird, this one much darker than the previous bird seen on the Belen plain. After a short while we caught up with our target species, **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**, a group of 9 were found feeding just off the track, when they took to the air it was obvious that there were 2 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** with them. During the next 30 minutes we found several parties of both species of Sandgrouse giving us all exciting views, we saw **Red-legged Partridge** and both Bustards in flight before returning for breakfast.

Suitably refreshed and attired we set off for Embalse Arrocampo, about an hours' drive along the motorway, in search of some wetland species notably absent from our trip list. As we emerged from the mini-bus we were greeted by the raucous sound of the **Great-reed Warbler** and in very breezy weather we could hear at least 3 **Savi's Warblers** reeling in the reedbed. We located a **Purple Swamphen**, nearby 3 **Purple Herons** were flying in and around the reedbed and we also saw **Reed Warbler**, **Squacco Heron**, another **Western Marsh Harrier** and we heard a distant **Water Rail**. We had lunch at the side of the van whilst watching the sky, as usual many raptors were on show, we noted both **Kites**, 3 **Vulture** species, **Booted** and **Short-toed Eagles**, **Western Marsh & Montagu's Harriers** and **Common Buzzard**.



The heat was now quite oppressive so we returned the roadside reedbed where a nice breeze could be enjoyed, there we all had excellent 'in the scope' sightings of a **Savi's Warbler**, we watched it turning its head to maximize the area covered by its reeling song, whilst a **Cetti's Warbler**, using sheer volume as its' strategy to maximize an audience, sang several times before we finally located it.

Other birds of note were: our only sighting of **Great Cormorant**, **Gull-billed Tern**, **Woodchat Shrike**, **Long-tailed Tit**, **Stonechat** and **Hoopoe**. After stopping off for ice-cream we returned home

for our afternoon siesta.

At 5 pm we set off for a return visit to the rice paddies and watched from the disused bridge south of Madrigalejo. We had a lovely two hours there, **Common Waxbill** showed very well, a pair sat in full view, the female was seen to preen the male in an affectionate manner, how cute. Another (better) sighting of **Little Bittern**, **Nightingale**, **Golden Oriole** and **Roller** added to our enjoyment, whilst the territorial disputes between **Great Reed** and **Reed Warblers** filled in the lulls.

We made a detour just south of the Rio Pizarro on our way home, to look over another area of rice paddies, we had great views of **Collared Pratincole** and we located an **Iberian (Blue-headed) Wagtail**. Fully satisfied with a great day's bird-watching we set off back to the finca looking forward to a glass of complimentary wine that came with our dinner.

Day 6. Saturday 27th May

We all had a lie-in, but excited chatter rang from the breakfast table, we were discussing our route to the Gredos Mountains because today we were saying goodbye to the lovely Finca Santa Marta.

So at 10 am with the bus fully laden we set off north for the mountains. We made several stop offs along the way to view rivers, valleys and hillsides. At an old bridge south of Candelada we found a young **Woodchat Shrike** being fed by its parents, a **Mistle Thrush** was a first for the trip when it flew across our view of the Shrike.

The next stop found on an elevated bank overlooking the river Tietar, there we saw both **Grey** and **White Wagtails**, we heard **Blackcap** and briefly we saw a pair of **Subalpine Warblers**. During our final stop at another bridge over the river Tietar we found the curiously shaped nest of the **Red-rumped Swallow**, a pair of **Cirl Buntings** bathed at the waters edge, they then played piggy-back before flying off with a cheerful chirp.

We arrived at the Parador de Gredos late afternoon, after quickly settling in we then set out to explore the area adjacent to the hotel. **Black Restart**, **Serin** and **Grey Wagtail** were are first sightings, but **Blackcap**, **Green & Great-spotted Woodpeckers** and **Coal Tit** all called but failed to put in an appearance.

A short trip into the valley by minibus found us overlooking some large meadows grazed by horses. **Rock (Sparrow) Petronia** was a surprise there but **Linnet**, **Yellow Wagtail** and **Northern Wheatear** were not. Further down the valley we entered a pine forest near a camp-site, and by a stream we recorded **Coal Tit**, **European Robin**, **Pied Flycatcher** and **Iberian Wagtail**. In the sky **Black & Red Kites** were common, **Booted Eagles** soared and a **Hobby** hawked the tree tops. Happy with our days birding we returned to the Parador for our 4 course dinner.



Day 7. Sunday 28th May



Our last full day – we assembled in the grey light of dawn to continue our crepuscular activities. We headed up the winding road towards the ‘Platforma de Gredos’ stopping many times along the 12 kilometers to the car park. The light was improving as we stopped at a bridge, a **Bonelli’s Warbler** sang incessantly from the only tree in the vicinity and was quickly joined by a **Common Whitethroat** and, at last, a **Blackcap** sang in full view from the top of a bush.

The next stop produced several very dark coloured **Dunnocks**, **Dartford Warblers** showed extremely well, **Spectacled Warblers** showed intermittently and **Ortolan Buntings** were very obliging. But the jewel in the crown was the **Bluethroat**, distant however, but showing very well.

We reached the car park at the top of the valley but the wind chill factor curtailed our visit, not before we saw a herd of **Spanish Ibex** and found **Rock Bunting** and **Red-legged Partridge**.

After breakfast we returned to the same valley and searched the lower levels below the tree line. We had stunning views of a flyover **Honey Buzzard**, we saw more **Pied Flycatchers**, **Serins**, **Coal Tits** and **Mistle Thrushes**. Our afternoon efforts were somewhat restrained due to the hot weather but we ventured further into the ‘Reserva Nacional de Gredos’ seeing more of the same species but failing to see **Citril Finch**.

Returning to the Parador some of us explored the pine forest at the back of the gardens. There we found another **Bonelli’s Warbler**, **Coal Tit**, **Green Woodpecker** and had a brief encounter with a **Crested Tit**. During the night several members of the group heard **Tawny Owls** hooting.



Day 8. Monday 29th May

The trip was over for most of the group and all that was left was the 2½ hour journey to the airport. But 2 of us were taking a later flight so we had time to explore an area in the Sierra de Guadarma, around the Puerto de Navacerrado. There we added, at last, **Citril Finch** to the list after having fairly good views of a pair. We also saw **Eurasian Nuthatch**, **Short-toed Treecreeper** and **Pied Flycatcher**. To put the icing on the cake and finish off the trip on a high note we found a **Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush** singing from a pylon, what an ending, even a delayed flight back did not take the shine off that bird.

The sheer beauty of the magnificent and varied landscapes of Extremadura, with its wide plains, high mountains and deep gorges, quiet roads and peaceful tranquility leaves a lasting impression on the visitor. This year was a particularly dry one so the profusion of wild flowers was not as inspiring as in previous years – however the variety, colour and sheer abundance of its wild birds should be enough to encourage, even the most cynical bird-watcher to return to this magical, unspoiled, haven.

Many fond memories of this tour fill my mind, but the early morning visit to steppe near Carsares has to be my favourite. Seeing so many Rollers, and all those Montagu's Harriers warming themselves on the track, the superb colours of the Black-bellied Sandgrouse and its ridiculous flight call will leave a lasting impression and one that will be hard to match in the future.

We saw 150 species in the seven day tour with the Bald Ibis being the most unexpected and the Eurasian Roller being the most favoured by the group. Butterfly numbers were down on the last two years but the very dry conditions reduced the number of flowering plants during our visit. Everyone enjoyed their stay at Finca Santa Marta and the Parador in the Gredos mountains, the food was delicious and the wine superb, the bird watching wasn't bad either!

Why not join us for 2007, see full details on www.wingspanbirdtours.com