

Andalucia & Extremadura

Trip Report



The Bustard Plains (Rasssp!!!)

The Eager Eight

April 22nd to April 30th 2004

©The Eager Eight 2004

Andalucia & Extremadura - A Spanish Odyssey

❖ Background

Whilst mulling over a Lagavulin or six during one of our many sorties over the border, Gordon Wilson, Paul Cassells, Paul & Tony Stewart agreed that we really should try to spread our birding wings and become more European. Listening to Gordon waxing lyrical about the merits of Andalucia & Extremadura really whetted the appetite and the juices were off and flowing. This region of southern Spain offered the prospect of many "lifers" and birding at its very best. Easy Jets decision to commence flights to Malaga meant that, in theory, we could have an affordable expedition to see some wonderful birds. Copious amounts of Rioja and ice cold beer were just two of the problems we might encounter - both could have a severe affect on our budgets, but we weren't to be dissuaded, we were going!!!!

Soon word spread and others expressed a wish to be included, and as a consequence seasoned campaigners such as Andy McLevy, Iain Robson, Maurice Hepple and Tony Crilley joined the collective.

This Motley Crew became known as "The Eager Eight"

The Eager Eight

- ❖ Gordon Wilson (Chopper) - The trip offered no new birds for Gordon, but he will delight in seeing the others get lifers. Having travelled widely abroad, this was to be his tenth trip to Spain, following on from the recce trip 4 weeks earlier. Over 700+ Western Pally ticks to his name.
- ❖ Andy McLevy (ADMc) - A veteran of the county circuit with many species seen in Britain and numerous birding holidays abroad including Spain. Only needs 3 birds on this trip and some introduced species. Estimate 2 lifers plus 2 intros.
- ❖ Iain Robson - Maturity belies his youthfulness, having carried out survey holidays, bird protection and monitoring work abroad. His 'wish list' indicated 22 lifers. Trip Estimate 21.
- ❖ Maurice Hepple - Another very knowledgeable birder having seen many species in Britain. He has, to date, managed a little euro birding on family holidays, however, this will be his first dedicated birding holiday abroad. 22 lifers indicated. Trip estimate 20 lifers + 3 western pally ticks (Not only has Maurice the distinction of finding a first for Britain, but a first for Blyth - a job!)
- ❖ Tony Crilley - TC is an experienced birder having travelled abroad numerous times. He still needs some of the Spanish specialities, however, and indicated on his 'wish list' 20 lifers. Trip estimate 18 lifers. (Packs everything into his birding and his suitcase including the kitchen sink - hence the need for two Land Rovers - one for TC & one for the rest of us)
- ❖ Paul Cassells (Cass) - This is Cass's second birding trip abroad having been on the successful trip to the Pyrenees a month earlier. Almost all the birds will be new to him. Trip estimate 70+ lifers (aka Anthony McPartland - check out the forehead. A budding artist, he recently completed his first Dot to Dot book)
- ❖ Paul Stewart - Originally indicated that lifers would total more than 60, however this will be reduced by his recent trip to the Pyrenees. Majority of experience in Britain although he managed to bird a little during a recent family holiday to the states. (Aka Declan Donnelly. Does a mean impersonation of Chief Ironside - sits tight and never goes to the bar)
- ❖ Tony Stewart - Indicated 56 lifers on the 'wish list'. Estimate 40+ lifers. Other reasons for going - Holiday romance, Rioja, lager and cheap cigarettes.

❖ Day One - Thursday 22nd April

❖ Dry, Sunny & Fairly Breezy - Low 15°C High 18°C

An early start had the E8 checking in at Newcastle Airport at 0430, for the Easyjet flight to Malaga departing at 0620. A smooth flight had us arriving on time at 1035, despite the turbulence on approach to Malaga. Soon we were collecting our 4x4's and we were on our way. Birding en-route we travelled south along the A7 motorway bound for the N340 at Estepona, a flyover Hoopoe provided us with our first Med special. At Torre de la Sal we turned inland and headed for our first stops of the day along the A377 road to Gaucin and Sierra Crestellina. The first of many Woodchat Shrikes were soon located along with Sardinian Warbler. Seven Bee-eaters provided a colourful flyby as well as two fabulous Red-rumped Swallows. Goldfinches were everywhere and there were a couple of familiar favourites with Great and Blue Tit.

The Main Ridge to the East give us our first raptors of the trip in the shape of a magnificent Griffon Vulture. Two Black Kites glided lazily into view and to the west the first of four Short-toed Eagles soared in the warm spring thermals, 2 Ravens and a Sparrowhawk were bit players in the aerial show.



❖ Griffon Vulture

The E8 pressed on to Gaucin Village along the MA512 and at 14.15pm we stopped for a light lunch of Albondigo's and Pan (Meatballs & Bread). ADMc preferred to bird rather than lunch and soon picked up Black Kite, Booted Eagle, Serin, Nightingale and lots of 'Hirundines'.

We continued along the road to Gaucin Hill Quarry, a known site for Black Wheatear in no time at all we had located a pair of these stunning birds foraging amongst the scrub. Two Thekla Larks performed well for an admiring E8 and a support act of Crag Martin, Stonechat and Jay completed the line up. Looking north we witnessed, what we suspected was, a passage movement of Black Kite slowly moving out of view some 30+ birds.

Heading south along the A369 to Algerciras numerous White Storks were seen, along with more Woodchat Shrikes, Bee-eaters and another Short-toed Eagle. At Jimena we headed for the Castilar Bridge, with our fingers crossed we approached the bridge hoping to catch sight of one of the key birds of the trip - White-rumped Swift. Alas we were not to be successful. It was probably a tad too early in the season to catch up with this difficult bird. However, Booted Eagle, Cetti's Warbler, Grey Wagtail and Great Spotted Woodpecker provided us with a small consolation.

We had to leave as it was getting late, so we headed off towards the Playa de la Los Lances along the A369. It was a glorious setting which greeted us upon arrival at the beach. We soon ticked off Little Owl, Crested Lark, Yellow-legged Gull, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover, Cattle Egret, Dunlin, Sandwich Terns and the icing on the cake - Eleven Spotless Starlings c/w a Collared Pratincole and Three Short-toed Larks!

Walking west along the beach to the mouth of the estuary, we could see in the distance a Gull roost. We could not get close enough to confirm what species were present. A quick dash back to the 4x4 saw us driving to the far side of the estuary to clinch the i.d of the Gulls. It soon became apparent that the roost contained Lesser Black-backed and Yellow Legged Gulls, Sandwich Terns along with our main target bird Audouins Gull.

The walk back to the 4x4 saw ADMc bag a Tawny Pipit and lots of Crested Larks.

Leaving the beach we motored towards the Sierra de la Plata, another well-known site for White-rumped Swift again we were to be disappointed, however we did see another Short-toed Eagle and Sardinian Warbler. Two Collared Doves provided the E8 with a trip tick.

Finally we arrived at Zahara Del Los Atunes and made our way towards our hotel - The Gran Sol, perfectly situated on the beach. After check in and showering we assembled in the bar where we enjoyed our evening meal of Egg and Veg, Tomato, cheese and Anchovies: Chicken Curry and Sword Fish. Later we gathered to call the Bird Log and recapped on what had been a memorable start to our holiday.

Gordon completed the formalities with a rundown of the next day's schedule and target species. Several celebratory drinks were consumed in the Hotel bar, before we eventually made it to bed. With Gordon reminding us that we had a 6.00am start for a pre-breakfast sortie for White-rumped Swift.

What a day!

❖ Day 2 - Friday 23rd April

❖ Dry & Sunny - Low 18°C High 24°C

Waking at 05.30, GW's idea of a 06.00am start didn't seem a good idea at all. It was pitch black outside and the head was throbbing. Still we had White-rumped Swift to go for, so the E8 assembled bleary eyed in the foyer. But it proved to be a false dawn as we couldn't get out of the hotel - everything was locked!!! It was like something out of Carry On movie. Happily we all skipped backed to bed for an extra hours sleep with all thoughts of the W-R S abandoned.

We met up again at 07.30am and enjoyed a typical buffet breakfast and we were on the road at 09.10am having loaded up with water from the local supermarket. A flyby juvenile Gannet surfing the Atlantic and Fan-tailed Warbler were welcome trip ticks.

The first stop of the day saw the E8 arrive at the Barbate Salt Pans where Common Sandpiper, Turnstone and Little Egret were added. Along the A480 we stopped for petrol where ADMc & Cass had brief, but tantalising views of Parakeets and in the shrub a Nightingale sang loudly. Above us flying around the castle on the hill were 4 Lesser Kestrels. Having filled up we were off again and joined the NIV to the Jerez Lagoons. This oasis consisted of two main pools, both of which were National Nature Reserves. On arrival at Chiga Lagoon we encountered our first Purple Gallinules and several Common Coots, but nothing else of note. The second lagoon "Salada" was much more interesting. Black-necked Grebes were present in good numbers along with 6+ White-headed Ducks. Whiskered Terns hawked insects over the water, three Collared Pratincoles graced us with their presence and 7 gaudy but stunning Red-crested Pochards idled on the surface. The fringes held Cetti's Warbler, Nightingale (always a joy to listen to), Spotted Flycatcher and Turtle Dove.

Between San Luca to our next destination 2 Montagu's Harriers quartered the roadside fields. The pine woods of Algaida give us some welcome respite from the searing sun and we made our way towards the Laguna De Tarelo. The woods contained Pied Flycatcher, Serin, and a pair of Sardinian Warbler busy feeding three hungry offspring. We approached the hide/screen where a group of Spanish students were having a field lesson - the tutor was proudly showing off a leg of a Purple Gallinule and various feathers to her students. We tried not to cause too much disturbance as we stretched to see 20+ White-headed Ducks.

A singing Great Reed Warbler, a lifer for some, proved difficult to see until it eventually moved out into the open where those that needed managed to see it. A roosting Night Heron gave distant, but obscured views.

Back in the 4x4's we ventured to the rear of the Bonanza Salt Pans and drove as far as we could to the old pumping station. Making frequent stops along the tracks several wader species were seen - Greenshank, Dunlin, Redshank, Spotted Redshank, Curlew Sandpiper and Black-winged Stilt. 'Iberian' Yellow Wagtails appeared to be everywhere. The Salt Pans give us Little Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Slender-billed Gull, 3 Marbled Ducks, Greater Flamingo and Little Stint. A ringtail Monty's put in an appearance and summer plumaged Grey Plovers dozed on the banks. This area was notable for the sheer numbers of Larks and billions of Midges. 4 species of Lark were present including Short and Lesser Short-toed, Crested and Calandra. The pumping station is a good area for Caspian Tern but alas not for the E8.

Turning through 360 degrees we headed along the Eastern bank of the Rio Guadaquiler hoping to eventually join the main A4/E5 highway to Seville. The 4x4 were a godsend along the heavily rutted track. Sharp eyes scanned the tree lined fringes and 2 Common Cuckoo's were seen along with Bee-eaters, Hoopoe, Purple Heron, 2 Squacco Herons, 2 Golden Orioles, and Woodchat Shrike (again). A Short-toed Eagle was seen grappling with a Snake and an Osprey, complete with the catch of the day, flew alongside our vehicles looking for a peaceful perch to devour its meal. Further on we came across a rubbish dump, which had the added attraction of 80 Black Kites circling it, along with Collared Pratincoles and Cattle Egrets. A small pond with 75 roosting Terns provided an I.D challenge for the group in strong sunlight. Initial thoughts had two species present, but after driving to the rear of the pool we found the Terns were all Gull-billed. The light really did play a trick or two. Waders on the pool included Redshank, Ringed and Kentish Plovers. Several Collared Pratincoles were nearby.

Eventually we joined the main road and motored to Seville. We managed to negotiate the complex ring road and found ourselves on the A49 to Heulva. At junction 10 we took the A483 to our next destination

Matalascanas. A flyover Great Spotted Cuckoo was being hurriedly pursued by a Magpie. For the next few nights the Hotel Tierra Mar was to be our home, with a magnificent beach setting overlooking the Atlantic.

A wonderful evening meal was enjoyed and the customary log duties carried out before an enjoyable and well-deserved drink or three.

❖ Day Three - Saturday 24th April

❖ Dry, Hot & Sunny - Low 19°C High 25°C

Day Three was Donana Bird Tours day and at 08.50 am we were met by our guides for the day John and Rebecca Butler. One 4x4 driver was looking forward to his day off driving until he drew the short straw and landed a plum seat in the "Rattler" - a Battered old Lada. Cass was to be the other member of the Lada Appreciation Society. Stinking of petrol we pulled up at our first stop - five minutes into our journey. The lads in the luxury, air conditioned, and soft seated mini-bus had picked up a Southern Grey Shrike perched on the fence, but had failed to notice 8 Azure-winged Magpies harassing a Common Magpie in a nearby pine tree. The "Unlucky Two" managed to relay a message via walkie-talkie to the "Lucky Six" and soon all were enjoying the Magpie spectacle. Passing the small town of El Rocio 3 Black Terns were seen hawking over the water. Next we made our way to the Northern Marrismas and pulled over on the Arroyo Santa Maria Bridge. From the bridge an immature Monty drifted by with several Bee-eaters, Little Ringed Plover, Tree Sparrow, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank and Turtle Dove either side of the bridge. A few hundred metres down the road we pulled into the Pine forest where we enjoyed further views of Iberian Magpie.

On the El Rocio to Villamanrique road a single Whinchat was picked up along with a Golden Oriole.

Next on the agenda was the Los Las Brados "marshy bit". It turned out to be a cracking little stop. A marsh Harrier was overhead together with 3 Spoonbills and feeding on the fringes were 5 Wood Sandpipers, 1 Spot Shank, 3 Temminck's Stints, 10 Black Winged Stilts and the best of all c20 summer plumaged Ruff. A Cetti's Warbler called loudly from cover.

John Butler then directed us to the place with no name - known just as The Reed Beds (how original). Here we got very brief views of a single Savi's Warbler, whilst at least 2 others "reeled" in the background. Grey and Purple Heron were present together with 3 Wood Sandpipers and 2/3 Purple Gallinules. A Squacco stalked the channel as we walked back to our vehicles and 5 Spoonbills flew overhead.

Next stop was the Dehesa de Abajo with its enormous White Stork and Black Kite Nesting colonies. This was basically a beautiful country park. Lots of birds and visitors frequented the park. The torrential monsoon conditions of a few weeks earlier had rendered the lake more or less useless and had forced many birds elsewhere. The sheer volume of rain meant that clean, food free water had entered the lake and covered most of the islets. Not to be put off we went for a walk whilst our hosts prepared our lunch. Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Jackdaws, Marsh Terns and a Booted Eagle made for a delightful pre-lunch amble. We returned 20 minutes later to a simple Lunch, surrounded by a pile of litter and assorted empty drink cans kindly left by our Spanish hosts. Lunch consisted of homemade pasties; tortilla, tomato and Garlic mayo washed down with a couple of ice cold beers.

On leaving the park we picked up a Northern Wheatear perched proudly on the fence.

Las Carracolas meaning "The Snail" farm was our next stop - this was a good site for migrating Stone Curlews. After a while three of these secretive birds were picked up, along with a distant Partridge type bird. ADMc alerted by the Partridge call came over to investigate and proudly proclaimed the Partridges as

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse - not one but Three! Stone the crows. Whilst enjoying the grouse, possibly the bird of the day, in the shape of a stunning male Montagu's Harrier glided by. With the light absolutely perfect we managed to see in fantastic detail the bird's plumage.

Lucio Del Lubio (the Wolf Lake) was the next port of call. The approach to the lake saw the E8 tick off Glossy Ibis, and Greater Flamingo, but an even greater prize awaited - 2 Crested Coots



❖ Crested Coot

We managed to pick up one bird, close by, as it dived into cover. However patience prevailed when shortly afterwards out popped the "Crestie" and gave the E8 brilliant views. The other bird was some distance away, but you could still make out the blood filled crests amongst the Common Coots present.

The reeds on the margins held Squacco, Purple and Night Herons feeding on the many tadpoles, frogs & small fish present in the water.

The main visitor centre for this part of the Cote de Donana was the Jose Antonio Valverde (Cerrado Garrido). John Butlers original "Where to watch birds" dismissed this site. It later transpired that he had immense difficulty reaching the place due to the severity of the rutted track. A second updated edition of the book is due out soon and the Jose Antonio centre is given the pride and place it rightly deserves.

You would run out of superlatives to describe the Heronry. It contained the usual suspects crammed tightly together in the red beds. A Dark Phase Western Reef Heron was an unexpected, but welcome surprise. A lifer for most and Western Palearctic tick for some. The Western Reef had paired up with a Little Egret and was sitting on eggs. Glossy Ibis were everywhere.

Maurice, so used to being isolated on Rocky Island (SSWT), roared out "Little Bittern" and right on cue the bird flew across our path and posed for a while on the top of the reeds before disappearing into cover. It couldn't get any better, but it did as ADMc picked out a Little Crake feeding along the edges. Great Reed Warblers sang loudly from the tops of the reeds and showed really well. And there were plenty of Black-winged Stilts and Little Grebes.

John ushered the E8 back towards the vehicles and on to the next site, which happened to be a derelict sub-station. We arrived at 17.10 and peered through a window opening to see a roosting Barn Owl half asleep on one of the internal cills. An Orphean Warbler was frantically trying to find an escape route after becoming trapped with the Owl. Outside two Red-rumped Swallows and a Marsh Harrier added to the fun.

Mobile again we headed off the dirt tracks to eventually rejoin the main highway. Before joining the road another Marsh Harrier was spotted along with 30+ Spanish Sparrows and a Spotted Fly.

The road back to the hotel was equally rewarding with 5 Hoopoes, 1 Golden Oriole, 2 Common Buzzards, 2 Booted Eagles, 50+ Bee-eaters and numerous Woodchat Shrikes.

Several Ostrich and a Turkey were picked up on the way home; unfortunately the Godfather from the Cresswell Mafia wouldn't allow them to be ticked.

Arriving back at the Hotel we said our goodbyes to John and Rebecca for an excellent day. We retired to our rooms for a wash and brush up, and then we met for our evening meal after agreeing a night excursion to one of the National Reservas for nocturnal species.

Palacio Del Acebron was chosen for our late night trip out. We drove the short distance from the hotel hoping to see or hear some of the nocturnal specialities. Luck was again on our side as after a short while we managed to see a Red-necked Nightjar flying around us. A further two birds were close by and at least one other called some distance away. Driving side by side, with full beam on, a Red-necked Nightjar was spotted roosting on the grass verge only 5 feet away. Excellent views were gained of the bird, as it remained motionless before flying off. With the Nightjars in the bag and having only the songs of numerous Nightingales to listen to, we decided to retire to the bar. Wise choice indeed.

❖ Day 4 - Sunday 25th April

❖ Dry, Sunny & Very Hot - Low 20°C High 30°C

A false start saw the E8 scurrying back to the Hotel as TC had forgotten to pack his bins, although he had packed everything else including the complimentary shower cap. The first stop of the day was a visit to the Acebuche Centre arriving shortly after 09.50am. The 4x4's were parked up with the local posse of Azure-winged Magpies busy foraging around the picnic tables.



❖ Azure-winged Magpies

In and around the Pine woods and lake we ticked off Woodchat Shrike, Pied & Spotted Flycatchers, 3+ LRP, Golden Oriole, Garden Warbler, Nightingale, Hoopoe, Savi's Warbler, Great Tit, Robin, and Dartford Warbler. From the hide some 30+ Whiskered Terns flew across the water, a Black Kite wasped the life out of the local wildfowl and Common Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Mallard and Little Grebe went about the business of staying alive. A juvenile Night Heron roosted in the far trees.

ADMc & PS were left in the hide as the others began to explore the trees outside. All of a sudden a shout rang out "Eagle". A mad dash then ensued as everyone scrambled back to the hide. We've never seen Chopper move so fast!! Peering out of the hide windows we witnessed a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles slowly gathering height in the warm morning air. We watched them for a few minutes until they disappeared out of sight. ADMc was slowly developing a reputation for having the keenest eyes - a fantastic coup.

After that, a walk along the boardwalks saw a Booted and a Short-toed Eagle pass overhead.

We headed back to the visitor centre for the toilets and refreshments. A conversation was started with a non-believing Park Ranger who doubted the S.I.E sighting. Following a frantic chatter with her colleague it was confirmed that a Pair of S.I.E used the trees as a roost. We were incredibly lucky, as the population had crashed in Donana from 20 pairs to 6/7 pair. This was due to disease in the Rabbit population, which had virtually wiped them out. Spirits were high as we left Acebuche and headed for La Roscina & Palacio De Acebron. Arriving at 12.30pm. Tree Sparrow, Goldfinch and more Woodchat Shrikes were found along with a Dark Phase Booted Eagle, Black Kite with Black and Whiskered Terns over the water.



❖ Yet another - Woodchat Shrike

El Rocio was the next port of call for lunch - the less said the better. But some of the E8 enjoyed Red-leg Partridge, Duck and Pork (eventually) in a massive restaurant. 'Chopper' got grumpy with the rather pitiful manager, who was last seen waving two fingers in the air as the E8 drove out of town.

A Red Kite overhead and Spoonbill and Avocet on the lake were a welcome distraction for ADMc who preferred to bird rather than eat. A Grey Heron wrestling with an enormous Carp provided a few light moments as it tried to figure how to get it down its throat. A Black Kite toyed with a Moorhen as it tried to make it its next meal.

Next stop was the Coto Del Ray Pine Woods and the chance to really test the 4x4's, much to Maurice "we're not going to make it" Hepple and Choppers disgust as we charged through Deep water and puddles taking care to hit every rut that we could - fantastic stuff. Stopping at various points along the road Short-toed Treecreeper was added to the list, other birds were Blue Tit, Pied & Spotted Flycatcher, numerous flocks of Bee-eaters and Serins and 2 Booted Eagles displayed above, whilst a Black Kite was observed well near its nest.

A halt was called to the proceedings and we headed back to chill and have a shower etc. Another fantastic meal was enjoyed in the Hotel with the added attraction of the Spanish equivalent of Bobby Crush - a really cheesy pianist.

❖ Day 5 - Monday 26th April

❖ Dry, Hot & Sunny - Low 20°C High 30°C

So began the long journey North to Extremadura. Birding on the move we picked up 3 Monties and a Honey Buzzard along with "common" stuff such as Black Kites, Hoopoes and Woodchats. At Merida Chopper radioed that we had the option of a detour to a small reserve at the Rio Guadiana. We arrived at the reserve to see 25+ Alpine Swifts overhead A Golden Oriole called behind us, with Cetti's, Nightingales and Reed Warblers competing against each other. A walk down to the river a White Wagtail and Comorant were added to the list. The reserve was a known place for Penduline Tit, which Chopper had seen on a previous trip. Maurice briefly caught sight of a bird on the reed mace but it was proving elusive for the rest of us. However a short while later we picked up a bird calling in the trees next to us and then managed to see it in all its glory - a lifer for half the group.

Eventually we arrived at the town of Trujillo on the outskirts of the Monfrague National Park. An enjoyable lunch was taken in a small roadside café. Whilst eating 60+ Lesser Kestrels circled overhead along with 2 Red Kites, 2 Black Kites, and a Booted Eagle. A Hoopoe flew across the road and ADMc who again preferred to bird rather than eat had a flyover Great Spotted Cuckoo.

We eventually arrived at the Hotel and checked in at 15.40. The hotel was excellent and some real thought had went into the design and build, it stood in perfect harmony with its surroundings. Chopper was enthusiastically greeted with "Gordon - you old so and so" by his friends Dick Forsman and Mark Constantine who were enjoying a drink in the bar. It transpired that they were collecting Birdcalls and songs of the Birds of the Western Pally. These sounds were being amassed by a formidable team - the who's who of the birding world. After collation they were destined for Apple Macs "iPod" which will hit the market place sometime next year. It will be the most in-depth collection of calls ever marketed.

Great Spotted and Common Cuckoo were picked up by Iain in the Hotel grounds. House Sparrows and Spanish Sparrows chirped noisily around the hotel. Crag Martins were nesting in the eaves, Red-rumped and

Barn Swallows circled and a Hoopoe was calling from the nearby Cork Oaks. More Black Kites floated above the woodland

We dumped our bags and headed off for Pena Falcon about 10-12 mile and a few minutes drive from the Hotel. Just how do you describe this place in a few short words? One word perhaps - Awesome. You just didn't know which way to look, there were birds everywhere.

Several Birders of all nationalities were viewing the crags and enjoying the spectacle from the safety of a lay-by.



❖ Pena Falcon

75 Griffon Vultures were in the air and dotted among the Crags, 2 Egyptian Vultures soared along with the incredible sight of 2 Black Vultures. The BV's had to be seen to be believed. ADMc then identified 2 Bonelli's Eagles soaring in a thermal before disappearing over the ridge. Lower down Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins posed and Rock Bunting, Black Redstart, Serin, White Wagtail and Blue Rock Thrush were all eagerly watched.



❖ Blue Rock Thrush

Moving on we headed for the Rio Tajo Bridge with its many hundreds of Hirundines. A natural spring provided a cool drink and a soak for some weary feet. At the spring a stonking Subalpine Warbler was heard then located. An Egyptian Vulture flew into view and over the hill a Black Vulture soared. Three Eagles flew appeared and were quickly identified as a Juvenile and Two Adult Bonelli's Eagles. A Wren was a welcome trip tick as it called loudly from the trees.

Slowly we were making our way to a known site for Eagle Owl. En-route 2 pair of Black-eared Wheatear was observed; together with a Southern Grey Shrike and stacks of Woodchats (can you ever get bored with a shrike). We stopped at a mirador (viewpoint) to scan the cliffs for Spanish Imperial Eagle, but none were present. There was however more Griffons and a couple of Egyptian Vultures present. Crossing the dam we drove uphill to the "white hut". This again was a good spot for S.I Eagle, but as before we dipped out. Three Subalpine Warblers and a Nesting Red-rumped Swallow were seen.

Eventually we reached the cliffs at Portilla Del Tieter. A number of birders were already on site as we approached the cliffs. Silently we took our place and waited.... and waited.... and waited for the Eagle Owls to appear. Alas it was a no-show and at 22.00 in near darkness we decided to call it a day. A Red-necked Nightjar was spotted hawking insects along the road.

A mad dash was then made back to the Hotel for dinner at 23.00 we were joined afterwards by Dick and Mark who shared a few glasses of Rioja with us. We had hoped for a few cold beers but the bar closed at 23.30. In hindsight it probably was a good thing that it closed - we were all very tired..

❖ Day 6 - Tuesday 27th April

❖ Cool, but sunny morning - Low 16°C High 24°C

We woke to a beautiful cool morning; the forecast was for a slow moving front with showers. Fortunately the rain held for day and later it became rather warm.

Pre- breakfast Two Spanish Sparrows had a hilarious tug o war with a piece of nesting material. Dozens were calling in the grounds along with Spotless Starlings, and Hoopoe. Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martin went about their business and a Stonechat was a bedroom tick along with a Common Cuckoo.

On the road for 9.00am we motored south towards Trujillo then headed off West towards Cascares. We took the sign posted track to Santa Marta de Magasca and some 4km along the track stopped to bird. This is a fantastic place for Montagu's Harrier with birds either side of the track. We picked up a couple of Stone Curlew in a field and two Black Vultures were seen flying. The Santa Marta track is renowned for Bustards and soon we were enjoying good views of Great and Little Bustard. A Quail was calling and two Ravens went over. Dipping on Sandgrouse we headed off for the Rio Magasca where basking Terrapins and a Sardinian Warbler were seen. Next stop was the Rio Almonte Bridge where a LRP and a 2 Common Sands were located. ADMc suggested that we drive down the EX 390 towards Casceres where previously he had connected with Roller. Once again our luck held as we had a minimum of 8 Rollers perched on telegraph wires. The Spanish had placed nest boxes on the Telegraph poles to encourage the birds. Black-eared Wheatear and Hoopoe were present too.

We then did a 360° turn and headed for a stretch of the EX390 which in the past had Black-shouldered Kite. No birds were seen this time but we added Woodlark to the list. We drove back up the road to where two belts of Stone Pines grew next to the road. White Storks had colonised the Pines. Parking up we walked north for about a kilometre to search for B-S.K. Our luck was in as PS spotted one of these gorgeous birds perched on an electrical wire. We stood and admired for a few minutes before making our way backed to the 4x4's. We headed off back to the Bustard site hoping to catch up with the Sandgrouse. 2 more Bustards were seen along with 4 Probable Black-bellied Sandgrouse, which flew quickly into a field and were lost to view. Time was getting on and we faced a long drive to the Eagle Owl site so we decided to leave. 2 Monties were the final birds we saw along the track before we motored off. We dropped ADMc at the Hotel and the remaining seven went for the Eagle Owl.

Eventually we arrived at The Eagle Owl site and once again we quietly took up our positions. A Black Stork flew by, and a Blue Rock Thrush sat at the mouth of the Owl's cave. After a while, our luck was in, as the Eagle Owl emerged to sit on the crag. Almost immediately it began calling. Everybody was cock-a-hoop. Having satisfied ourselves with the bird we made our way back to the 4x4's. Iain called out "whats that noise" and lo and behold a second Eagle Owl was picked up opposite. A Linnet and 2 Rock Buntings were also seen. 3 Red-necked Nightjars flew over the parked cars.

We made our way backed for our late evening meal. With another fantastic day under our belts.

❖ Day 7 - Wednesday 28th April

❖ Cool, Overcast with Sunny Intervals - Low 16°C High 24°

By now the expected weather front was with us, and we woke to a cool overcast morning. After breakfast we headed off for La Bascula "the white hut site" along the CC911. From 09.30 to 10.45 we patiently scanned the ridge searching for raptors. Soon we had picked up a Booted Eagle and More Griffon Vultures. The area was good for Black Vulture with 4/5 birds being located including a pair on a huge nest. A Cirl Bunting was heard calling behind us as well as the first Tree Pipit of the trip. A pair of Red-rumped

Swallows had made their home in the white hut and it was fascinating to see the funnel shaped nest they had made.



❖ Red-rumped Swallow

Overhead at about 10.40 an Eagle flew overhead, after discussions the ID was clinched as Spanish Imperial Eagle. As we were driving to another site 2 German birders shouted, "Eagle". We piled out the 4x4's to see the magnificent spectacle of S.I. Eagle flying to our right - what a result!

We drove 1 km down the road to the Teiter Dam Pine Woods searching for a trip tick or two. Golden Oriole was heard calling as we vacated the 4x4. Iberian Magpies and Subalpine Warbler were present too. A shrill call alerted us to the presence of a Crested Tit, the first of the trip and MH picked out a Short-toed Treecreeper.

At 11.20 we made our way back towards Pena Falcon where the Castilla de Monfrague was to be our next stop. Dick Forsman had told us of a site, near the car park, which was good for Rock Sparrow. Parking up we scanned the small caves for the Rock Sparrow but our luck was out. We walked to the top of the castle and picked up Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and More Griffes. A couple of pristine summer plumaged Rock Buntings were worthy of praise. The view from the top was excellent. A pair of Chough landed quite close and was posing for the boys. PS & TS desperate for a Sparrow of any description scrambled over the rocks to more quiet areas away from the tourist track. A small bird was seen to fly into a tree and after stalking it was found to be a female Rock Sparrow. In the bag, we rejoined the lads and made our way downhill. We then discovered more Rock Sparrows in the very caves Dick had told us about and had excellent views.

At 15.00 acting on a tip from a fellow birder we drove back to Torrejon Del Rubio and took the road west. After approx 4km a track signed "Tahena" was picked up and we headed north along it for a kilometre. We had a fruitless search of the pylons hoping to catch a glimpse of a Spanish Imperial Eagle Eyrie. A nest was spotted in the distance but looked far too small for an Eagle. We abandoned the search and headed off for the main road. As we motored away PS shouted, "stop" - he had spotted the nest on the Pylon. We approached under the cover of the trees, getting as close as we could legally could to see the spectacle of

the Female Spanish Imperial Eagle, wings outstretched covering a fluffy white eaglet from the afternoon sun. A truly memorable moment. A kingfisher flew from its perch as we drove by. 3 Monties, 1 Quail and a superb Great Spotted Cuckoo were found.



❖ Great Spotted Cuckoo

By now the hunger pangs had kicked in, so we headed for Trujillo and the little café we had found previously. On the way we stumbled across a Vulture feed at a carcass in a field. There were plenty of Griffes and 3/4 Black Vultures that gave us the best views of the trip. These colossal birds were the kings of the kill as they bossed the Griffes and hauled their mass bulk around. They calmly took to the air as the words "barn door" and "brick shithouse" popped into the mind. Wow!!!!

Finally we arrived at Trujillo and had a very late lunch of Garlic Prawns, Paella and Hamburger specials. We were honoured when ADMc joined us and tucked into a burger.

We headed off to the Bustard site at Santa Marta as the heavens opened and the skies crackled with the sound of thunder and lightning. More Monties were spotted including 5 together, 2 Rollers were perched on a fence post, and one had a lizard in its beak. A shout went up, as a Party of 7 Sandgrouse appeared, then 2 more and then a single. The storm had spooked the birds as another single, later identified as Pin-tailed flew over the 4X4's. PS ventured outside in the rain and followed the Sandgrouse as they circled and came back on themselves. We roughly pinpointed the spot where we thought they landed and headed over. The rain eased by this time so we all headed out to search for the Sandgrouse. A shout rang out as a flock of 30+ Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over and went to ground over the ridge. A male Monty flew over the field and flushed a mixed flock of Pintails and Black-Bellies. The light was perfect as they flew off to avoid the Harrier and we got fantastic views of the plumages.

We decided to call it a day and head back to the hotel for an early meal (for a change) and a few beers. Driving along the road we slowed too let a tractor pass and we were alerted to an unusual call. MH said Scops Owl, but was unsure. Iain recorded the call on to his video camera so that we could play back to raptor man Dick at the hotel. Some doubts were raised, but whilst filling up the 4x4's with diesel a CD was played with a Scops Owl call. ID clinched.

We arrived back at the hotel and it was suggested that we scan the pylons to the west of the hotel for the Spanish Imperial Eagle nest that we had seen earlier and would you believe it there it was - what a hotel tick.

Later Dick confirmed the call as that of a Scops Owl. Determined to find another we decided to venture out after our meal that night and we were privileged when Dick and Mark joined us in our search. They brought along their sound recordings and equipment hoping to tempt out an Owl. Unfortunately the weather was against us and all we got was another calling bird.

❖ Day 8 - Thursday 28th April

❖ Overcast with Sunny Intervals - Quite cool Low 15°C High 22°C

This morning we skipped brekky to get an early start back south to Malaga. We were on the road at 07.05. The last birds of the Extremadura region were to be Sparrows, Montagu's Harrier and the odd Black Kite.

We drove down to the small village of Bolonia to a favoured spot for White-rumped and Little Swift from 13.00 to 15.00 we searched in vain. We did manage to get Sardinian Warbler, Stonechat and a flyby Gannet on the sea. The only Hirundines present were a few Crag Martins although good birds they were not what we wanted. It has since been reported in the March edition of Birding World issue no 207 that the very spot we were scanning had the earliest ever record of White-rumped and Little Swift. Where had they gone? Perhaps the cold wind and blustery conditions had pushed them north.



❖ Crag Martin

We drove back down to Bolonia and had a couple of Brief searches for Rufous Bush Chat with out luck. A Melodious Warbler was picked up in the scrub.

We negotiated the various toll booths on the motorway and arrived at the Hotel at 17.30. Monk Parakeet and Ring-necked Parakeet were flying around close to our digs. A couple of the lads headed for the Guadalhorce reserve where the highlights were Redstart and Sedge Warbler.

A change of plan saw 6 of us head into the town of Torremolinos where a rather cheap Chinese meal was enjoyed with a couple of beers.

03.45 had us staggering back to the hotel; worse for wear. We were up at 06.30 for Breakfast and a swift departure to Malaga airport and the flight home. A superb Spotless Starling was singing as we left for the airport with fantastic mimicry. Its repertoire included Blackbird alarm, Common Swift and Scops Owl.

We met up with Steve Holliday in the departure lounge that had been enjoying a birding break of his own. We were soon swapping stories as we waited for our flight call. Despite an odd hairy moment when the flight disappeared from the Departure screen we were soon homeward bound. We arrived safely and said our good byes. What a brilliant trip.

❖ Summary

This was a truly marvellous experience and will last a long time in the memory. All in all we saw close to 190 species and saw some wonderful country. The whole trip went well thanks to the Meticulous planning by Gordon. I know he spent a lot of time working at it but it had spectacular results. The food and Hotel accommodation were superb and the vehicles were spot on. The cost ran to approx £550 but considering what we crammed in and the quality of the trip and birds it was rather cheap.

A trip is only good if everybody gets on. And we certainly did. The experienced lads were only too willing to impart their vast knowledge on the in-experienced and despite some hilarity and constant ribbing.

Bird of the trip, well there were stacks, but for sheer presence I'd have to plump for the Black Vulture at the carcass.



❖ The Motley Crue

Tony Stewart - May 2004

❖ Facts and Figures

Dates and Flights	Flight no.	Depart	Arrive
Thursday 22 nd April 2004	6463	06.20 Newcastle	10.30 Malaga
Friday 30 th April 2004	6464	11.10 Malaga	13.20 Newcastle

Contact Details	e-mail/Fax/Telephone
Flights	www.easyjet.com
Car Hire - 2 Land Rover Freelanders	sales@carhire-online.co.uk
Hotel Gran Sol - Zahara de los Atunes Cadiz	direccion@gransolhotel.com
	Fax: 00 34 956 439 197
	Tel: 00 34 956 439 309
Hotel Tierra Mar Golf - Matalascanas Huelva	Hoteltierramar@atlanticclub-hotels.com
	Fax: 00 34 959 440 720
	Tel: 00 34 959 440 275
Donana Bird Tours - John Butler	john@donanabirdtours.com
Hotel Hospederia Parque de Monfrague - Torrejon el Rubio	reserves@hotelmonfrague.com
	Fax: 00 34 927 455 016
	Tel: 00 34 927 455 245
Hotel Tryp Gaudalamar - Malaga	www.octopustravel.com (e-mail ????)
	Fax: 00 34 952 240 385
	Tel: 00 34 952 231 703

Total Costs Per Person	£'s
Flights	£81.00
Car Hire	£91.75
Hotel Gran Sol - 1 Night	£42.00
Hotel Tierra Mar - 3 Nights	£135.00
Hotel Hospederia Parque Monfrague - 3 Nights	£103.00
Hotel Tryp Gaudalamar - 1 Night	£44.00
Donana Bird Tour Day	£17.50
Fuel and Road Tolls	£26.80
Total Paid	£541.05