

Extremadura, via Portugal, April 19-24,2009

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This was now my seventh trip to this wonderful area of Spain, the other guys were new to it , so I was the unofficial, unpaid guide! To be honest, I just pointed the car in the right direction, birds are everywhere here.

As previously, we flew into Faro, Portugal, picked up the hire car and headed 5 minutes west to the marshes. Today, however was Sunday and the locals were out in force. Where the previous December we had the place to ourselves, now a traffic jam including lots of noisy motorbikes, together with a fraction of the winter birds present, meant we opted to move on fairly quickly. We did see a small selection of waders including Little Stints, Dunlin, Curlew, Kentish Plover, as well as a few Little Terns.

Our destination today was the Portuguese steppe country of Alentejo where we'd booked into what turned out to be a marvellous B&B near Elvas. Quinta Vale de Marmelos, an idyllic retreat set in its own gardens and orchards, near the Spanish border. An hour's drive north from Faro, saw us birding along sandy tracks south of Sao Marcos De Atobeira. Here we were treated to amazing views of Great Bustards as a group of 16 in a nearby field were feeding, locals collecting thyme put them into the air and to our delight they turned and flew by us at 50 metres distance! We could see each bird was panting with an open bill in the heat of the day and hear the sound of their flapping wings. A lifer for the guys, and what a way to see them. Nearby, a circling eagle was identified as a Short-toed, followed by a second, other raptors here included Black Kite, Common Buzzard, Kestrel and the first of many Montagu's Harriers, eight were watched displaying, tumbling, calling and food passing.

Along the track a pair of Black-eared Wheatears flitted ahead of us, 4 Bee Eaters past, Azure winged Magpies and 2 Hoopoes flew by, other Hoopoes called from farm buildings as Short-toed and Crested Larks sang above. Red-rumped Swallows, Southern Grey Shrikes, Corn Buntings, Stonechats and a calling Quail added to our tally.

The Bustards having landed not too far off were now 'scoped and the hillside revealed Little Bustards too, as well as a Roller, passing Spoonbill, several Lesser Kestrels, more Montagu's and 7 Black-bellied Sandgrouse which flew in to land just out of view. 5 more Black Kites, 4 Red Kites, 4 Ravens and singing Calandra Larks, many performing courtship chases, delighted us before we moved on and headed north towards Elvas. Along the way, we noted on our frequent stops Nightingales singing wherever we crossed a river together with noisy Cetti's Warblers, 2 Black-shouldered Kites and many of the common birds of the area.

After a nice night in our accommodation, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast and a stroll through the lovely gardens. A pair of Red-rumped Swallows was nesting at a building down the garden, Spotless Starlings whistled from the trees, a Golden Oriole was glimpsed and 2 Little Bustards flew past. Our first stop today was at a small fishing lake nearby, here we

had a Little Bittern, seen twice in flight and heard calling, a Common Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilts and Sand Martins, also several singing Great Reed Warblers showed well. Moving on, we crossed the border into Spain, heading up into the Sierra san Pedro, stopping at the River Guerrero. As the morning warmed up, raptors began to soar above. 10 Griffon Vultures and a single Black appeared, then a nice sub-adult Spanish Imperial Eagle was spotted, another lifer for the guys. Sardinian Warblers rattled from nearby bushes, Blue and Great Tits, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and Chaffinches reminded us of home. 10 Bee eaters were seen and several singing Thekla larks displayed above the Cork oaks.

We moved on north west, halting again at a likely looking spot at the River Zapaton where a small colony of Bee-eaters were nesting, as was a pair of Little Ringed Plovers. Above, 25 more Griffons were seen with 3 Black Vultures and a Black-shouldered Kite. As we left a Booted Eagle appeared and a Common Cuckoo sang from a bush top. Woodchat Shrikes were noted frequently. A stop for lunch at the viewpoint at Herruela Station, revealed soaring Black and Griffon Vultures and a large Osellated lizard and Swallowtail Butterfly as we looked out over the distant steppe lands and snow covered Gredos mountains, some view!

The wooded hillsides south of Salorino held Woodlark, Nuthatch, Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Nightingale, Blackcaps and Cuckoo, before descending to open grasslands north of San Vincente de Alcantara where perhaps 100 Griffons circled close by with a few more Black Vultures dropping down to what must have been a carcass of some kind. Not much must have remained, as the birds didn't hang around, many flying right over our heads. Calandras and Short-toed Larks displayed everywhere, their songs filling the air. Lesser Kestrels hunted nearby and a nice Little Owl was spotted perched close by as we left.

South of the village many White Storks had their nests on roadside pylons and then 3 Great Spotted Cuckoos caused us to halt. As they chased each other they called loudly. We had superb views as the birds flew past several times landing in nearby bushes. This trip revealed more of these noisy migrants than any of my previous ones.

Our third day saw us leaving the lovely B&B and heading off back into Spain and our second base for the next two nights, Las Canderas near Trujillo, an isolated guesthouse with panoramic views over the plains. Our route took us north east, along the motorway past Badajoz and Merida, then north before turning off on the EX382 to Montanchez. A roadside stop at a quiet spot found us in an area alive with birdlife, a Cuckoo was brought in close with an imitation of the call and Bee-eaters hawked for insects in the warm morning sun. Woodchats sang from bush tops and 2 Hawfinches flew by. Thekla Larks fed in a field and a Golden Oriole called nearby. Corn Buntings, Serins, Linnets and Goldfinches seemed to be everywhere.

The River Tamuja was our next halt where Crag Martins seemed to be nest building under the bridge. Another Bee-eater colony of some 20 birds were inspecting low sandbanks and migrating Greenshank and Common Sandpiper fed upstream. Another Cuckoo was calling and Black Kites circled overhead. Today was hot, the temperature reaching 75 c degrees. We now headed across more steppe country, towards Torrequemada where nest boxes on roadside telegraph poles attract breeding Rollers. Here we saw 4 birds, squabbling with

Jackdaws over possession of the boxes, with a further 3 Rollers in the village. Again, Calandra Larks seemed to be everywhere, they certainly are the common lark species of the region, with many birds singing, courting or chasing off rival males. Here too, about 50 Griffons circled above.

The main road between Caceres and Trujillo is rapidly being turned into a fast dual carriageway with, at the moment, many roadworks and I feared I might not be able to access the old road to Santa Marta de Magasca, but did manage to locate it through all the roadworks. Many roads in the area are being transformed, not always for the better, as they have very high drops at each side preventing stopping when a good bird is seen or a likely area spotted. The road/track heading North West from here is in a poor state of repair and in it's quiet area may remain so, which is good from a birding point of view. This stretch has, over the years provided me with many memorable birding moments and did not fail this time. In fields at the start of the road, we spotted a group of Great Bustards, 22 in total, some of which flew across the road giving good views. Close by, several Wheatears fed and many more Calandra's, Short-toed Larks and Corn Buntings were seen. Along the road we stopped frequently, seeing 2 close Black Vultures lumbering into the air after feeding on the ground. 5 Ravens called as they passed by and Montagu's Harriers gave brilliant views, especially a very close pair courtship chasing and landing right by the car! This area always has a good population of these elegant summer visitors and this year was no exception. As we slowly drove on, birds seen included Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Hoopoes, Stonechats, Black Kites and a Short-toed Eagle. We then saw a group of Griffons dropping lower and landing very near a farm, perhaps 50 in total together with Red and Black Kites, Ravens and an Egyptian Vulture and several huge Black Vultures. They had spotted a dead lamb, not much of a prize for so many hungry raptors and some were squabbling over it, snatching what they could when from the farm came a large dog which grabbed the unfortunate lamb, chasing off the birds. No tinned dog food for this beast! Spain's vultures are suffering badly after the government banned the dumping of carcasses by farmers, thought to be spreading Mad Cow disease. However the day we returned home, I heard this law was being revoked as it was realised that it would result in the demise of the birds if it continued to be enforced.

Nearby Encinilla farm, which holds a colony of Lesser Kestrels, did not disappoint with about 10 pairs giving a great show. At first they were high overhead, returning from hunting the plains, then dropping in giving their shrill calls, to the rooftop nest sites. These elegant little Falcons are thankfully on the increase after a population crash when the numbers in Spain dropped from 100,000 to 8,000 pairs in 10 years. Many Montagu's displayed here and a food pass was nice to see. One of them, being a first year male was trying hard to impress a female with his display. She flipped over and touched talons with him, so maybe he had found a mate. Above 100 or so Common Swifts fed and 2 Quail were heard calling in nearby fields. 15 more Great Bustards were scattered on both sides of the road and then we spotted some distant Sandgrouse, 5 of which luckily flew by us calling, proving to be Pin-tailed. Carefully negotiating the worst section of road, we reached the end where a Great Spotted Cuckoo perched on a wire. I'd seen them here 11 years previously too!

The following morning, after watching Little Bustards, Great Spotted Cuckoos and Stone Curlews in front of the guest house garden we headed off to the famous Monfrague National Park. On the way we stopped to watch a pair of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse as they circled the car. Arriving, we climbed the steep steps to the Castillo perched precariously atop the Sierra de Corcheulas. On the way up I heard a Short-toed Treecreeper, and as in past years a pair was feeding on the castle walls. A pair of Choughs were nesting here and one clung to the wall not 10 metres away! Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins were rebuilding nests in a cave and a Blue Rock Thrush sang from a wire above. Woodlarks were displaying giving their lovely song and a male Black Redstart flitted ahead of us. The spectacular views from here make the steep climb worthwhile and Vultures and Kites glide by at eye level. This is not a place for any vertigo sufferers. Below the steep cliffs the Dehesa Oak woodlands stretch unbroken for miles, a party of school children also enjoying the views.

Back down to Penefalcon, the viewpoint and the gorge of the Tajo River, where several hundred Griffons are resident. A kettle of soaring birds was forming in the warm air before setting out on their feeding forays over the distant plains. Most winter here, though a few migrate to Southern Spain and into Africa. They give very close views, circling quite low before landing with outstretched feet in an upward swoop onto their nests, where hungry young awaited. A Black Stork pair has nested here for many years and once again the female seemed to be incubating in her cave nest, the male flying in to land nearby. Two more pairs at nests were seen further into the reserve. High above some Alpine Swifts fed with Common Swifts and an Egyptian Vulture soared with more Griffons and two Short-toed Eagles. On the cliff faces we saw at least 6 Blue Rock Thrushes, a pair of Rock Buntings and more Black Redstarts. Further road improvements here have led to an increase in visitors, as the Park was given National Park status in 2007. Another party of students looked quite bored, obviously not birders!

We now headed on to the Tajo River bridge, where we sat and ate a picnic lunch watching nesting Alpine Swifts. About 20 pairs of these nest under the bridge together with around 1,000 House Martins. They gave us a great display of ariel mastery, while in nearby bushes a cracking male Subalpine Warbler flitted by and more Griffons and Black Kites soared above on the hot thermals.

A brief stop for refreshments at the visitor centre in Villa Real, then we drove the short distance to the Tajadilla viewpoint, where the damned river was all but dry. A Red Deer drank from what little water was left here. Egyptian Vultures nest on the crags opposite the viewpoint and once again one was seen perched on the cliff top. Black Vultures and yet more Griffons, the latter with nests here were noisily harassed by several Black Kites, then a Bonelli's Eagle was spotted circling high above, showing its diagnostic white patch on the back. Crag Martins, a Cuckoo, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes, Serins, Woodlarks and Azure-winged Magpies made up what is another superb place to stop.

The Tietar cliffs and the Oak woods beyond mark the eastern edge of the reserve. Here nest a pair of Eagle Owls which we were told had young but this visit we failed to see any, they were hidden beneath bushes keeping cool as the temperature soared and unfortunately the adults were not present. 2 more pairs of Black Storks, however, could be watched at their nests just across the river.

The Oak woods here at the Park boundary seem alive with birds in spring and at least 6 Nightingales were singing, Cetti's Warblers, Blackcaps, Melodious Warblers, Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, and Short-toed Treecreepers were watched and above more Red and Black Kites, a Booted Eagle and a Common Buzzard were all seen.

Our final destination of the day was the Arroycampo wetlands where the highlight was an obliging Savi's Warbler which we watched at very close range. Hawking over the lake, we could see several Gull-billed Terns 15 in total, with 1 Common Tern. 5 Great Crested Grebes and some Gadwall added to our growing bird list and in the reeds we could see several Great Reed Warblers and hear Reed Warblers too. A pair of Marsh Harriers floated by and a Great White Egret followed. At least 12 Purple Herons were seen and half that number of Greys, Purple Gallinules could be heard but we did not glimpse any, then a pair of Common Sandpipers was seen, as the biting midges got the best of us and we called it a day, driving back to the hotel.

Our last day was upon us and the hotel garden again provided an excellent start to the day. 3 Little Bustards flew by, followed by the resident pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos, a pair of Ravens were nearby and bill clapping White Storks noisily courted. We set off for Trujillo as I'd promised the guys some close up views of Lesser Kestrels at their nests in the roof slates of the town's bullring. We were not disappointed, as at least 20 birds were present giving great views as they came in with food items, one a very large cricket, to perch on the low rooftop above us. Calling constantly, they gave a super show as usual and we dragged ourselves away very content. After stopping to fuel up for our long drive back to the Algarve, we spent most of the morning on the fabulous Belen Plains where we saw lots of birders enjoying a feast of birdlife! A group of 19 Great Bustards in one field held several displaying males, an amazing sight as they seemed to turn inside out showing off dazzling white under wing and tail feathers to the attendant females, most of which fed, quite unimpressed! 5 more were later spotted along with at least 8 Little Bustards. As we looked around, the skies seemed to be full of raptors, 40 Griffon Vultures and 1 or 2 larger Black Vultures soared overhead with Red and Black Kites, an Egyptian Vulture and Booted Eagle. Then 2 Black-shouldered Kites hovered above, scanning the ground for prey, as 3 hunting Montagu's Harriers quartered the fields, what a place! Great Spotted Cuckoos seemed to be everywhere this year, we saw 7 or 8 in a short time, calling loudly, as they chased each other near a nesting colony of Egrets in some dead trees, mostly Cattle Egrets with some Little Egrets too. 3 Common Buzzards were seen, as well as about 8 Hoopoes. The usual plethora of Larks, sang as we finally departed the area and headed south.

An unsuccessful search for waders and Marsh Terns in the Madrigalejo area, due mainly to the lack of any water this year, then we set off towards Zafra, Mouraira and back into Portugal. Birds seen enroute included Common Buzzards, Hoopoes, Southern Grey Shrikes, Woodchats and Azure-winged Magpies. Our last stop was back at Castro Verde, in the fading light we saw lots of Cattle Egrets flying to their roost, and spotted a Great Bustard nearby. As darkness marked the end of a fabulous birding trip, a Stone Curlew could be heard calling on the plains and we all agreed we would once again return to this excellent area.

A.S. Jack.