

Report on Birding Trip to Andalucia Run By Plegadis 14-18 December 2009.

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Day 1 - 14th December 2009

Arriving at Malaga Airport, some three hours south of our evening accommodation we were met by Sergio one of two local guides that stayed with us throughout the week. Trevor Blake from Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club arrived on the same Easyjet flight; together we noted our first species in the airport car park, **White Wagtail** and **House Sparrow**.

The journey north through the hills behind Malaga, then through agricultural land and rolling hills criss-crossed with lines of Olive Trees provided a few roadside sightings typical of the habitat including small parties of **Goldfinch** and **Common Kestrel**. **Common Stonechat** of the *rubicola* race prominent on fences and tall roadside weeds, small tight groups of **Jackdaw** appeared around scrub surrounded buildings and several **Starling (sp)** were noted. By the time we stopped mid-afternoon for Tapas in a small traditional Tapas bar in a village nestled beneath imposing rocky outcrops near Campillos we swiftly confirmed the Starlings as **Spotless Starling**. **Collared Dove** and the first of several **Red-backed Shrike** were also noted in this area.

We arrived at our first accommodation 'La Posada de Montellano' with maybe an hour of light at most left. After check in we took the little time left to wander a few hundred metres away from Montellano toward the large wooded area that lies to the north east. Our reward for avoiding the temptation of sleep was, first one, then two **Griffon Vulture** over the edge of the wood.



After a spectacular sunset the evening was full of introductions and discussion of the week as the rest of the group arrived from various points during the next few hours.

Day 2 - 15th December 2009

Taking in the impressive views from my room's small balcony as dawn cast its thin light over the muted winter creams and buffs of the rounded hills surrounding Montellano the tinkling song of a nearby **Serín** encouraged me to hurry down and start the day's birding. With seven pairs of eyes in our bus the journey through the La Campiña area produced a number of additional species to those seen on the first day. A single **White Stork** standing sentinel-like atop a huge nest topped pylon and brief views of a flying **Black-winged Kite** were the highlights.

After collecting a local guide we moved off the main roads onto dirt tracks that wound between huge empty fields and areas of regimented Olive trees to look for our first major targets **Great Bustard** and **Little Bustard**. As we approached our first stop we could see at least two **Red Kite** moving across fields ahead of us, they and another were in attendance throughout our stop at this location as were up to nine **Raven**.

A car-sized puddle held a single **Green Sandpiper** that flew as we approached and later a small group of **Linnet** arrived to drink. Within five minutes our guide located a small group of **Great Bustard** huddled in tall grass at the edge of a line of Olive trees. Views of this party were distant, as we moved on three **Eurasian Curlew** lifted from between lines of Olives and the first of what was to be many **Black Redstart** put in an appearance as we passed by some farm buildings.

A few kilometres further and a almost identical field of low Olive trees produced an incredible flock of over 100 **Stone Curlew** at first lifting off in twos and threes before moving off into an adjacent ploughed field and back again, the occasional 'kurr-llie' calls resonating around the otherwise silent land. **Crested Lark** lifted from field edge to furrow as our minibus moved further and the razor sharp eyes of one of the group picked out the one and only **Hen Harrier**, a ringtail of the trip. Only minutes later and we also had **Marsh Harrier** on our trip list as a female/immature drifted over.

As we moved slowly along the lines of Olive Trees one of the guides suddenly picked out a **Great Bustard** perhaps 200m away. We swung the van around 90° and stopped perhaps 20metres from the edge of the field. Here we were able to watch a group of 10-15 **Great Bustard** for some time engaged in the early stages of display, posturing as they strolled regally back and forth. **Red-legged Partridge** added to the scene before we had a superb flypast by two groups of three **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**. A short while later most of the group connected with a further 10-12 of this species again in flight whilst others tried in vain to stalk the **Stone Curlew** for close up pictures.

Our next stop in contrast to the steppe was the Lantejuela Natural Reserve. **Blackcap** and a confiding **Little Owl** were quickly noted as were large numbers of **Mallard**, **Northern Shoveler** and a single **Little Grebe**. Two to three **Cetti's Warbler** fired off their explosive song from the surrounding vegetation; **Spanish Sparrow**, **Greenfinch** and **Song Thrush** were amongst the other passerines noted as walked around the reserve.

Three **Black-winged Stilt**, adults and a 1st-winter produced perfect photographic opportunities as they dip fed on the mirror calm main lagoon.



Black-winged Stilt

A **Zitting Cisticola** offered excellent open views in a dry area as did several ground-feeding **Common Chiffchaff**.

We headed back to take our picnic lunch at the entrance to the reserve pausing to take pictures of the **Little Owl** enjoying the afternoon sun. Lunch was disturbed twice, first by two soaring kite, one **Red Kite** and one **Black Kite** allowing a great comparison of these two species, then by a magnificent pale phase **Booted Eagle** that had everyone reaching for their cameras as it drifted over our heads.

Our afternoon destination in complete contrast was a 6km walk along Via Verde de la Sierra ending at Peñón de Zaframagón. Via Verde is an old railway line, complete with several cool tunnels, curves around lush green forest scrub of Holm and Cork Oak.

Sardinian Warbler called and darted across the path every 20metres, an Iberian race **Green Woodpecker** yaffled nearby. Suddenly low over the treetops a **Bonelli's Eagle** carrying a dismembered Rabbit glided toward us, 20metres above our head, passing above us it circled briefly before being lost over the trees. A few kilometres further we were further graced by this increasingly rare species as two adult and a juvenile jostled above the forested crags on the approach to Peñón de Zaframagon.

Griffon Vulture soared in the afternoon thermals in increasing numbers as we approached the impressive rock formation that provides ideal vulture nesting habitat. By the time we reached the visitor centre perhaps 60-70 soared in a huge kettle.



Bonelli's Eagle

Rock Sparrow and **Black-bellied Dipper** were the pick of the passerines, whilst **Blackcap** was the commonest species here, the constant 'tack' calls never far from earshot. Several **Spanish Wild Ibex** on the lower scree slopes added a different dimension to the trip which ended with some short video presentations in the visitor centre of nesting Bonelli's Eagle and Griffon Vulture as well as a hair raising Fox and Ibis chase sequence well worth seeing if you have the opportunity. Part of the group even managed a calling **Eagle Owl** as they waited for the minibus to ferry them back to the hotel.

Day 3 - 16th December 2009

Drizzle met us face on as we left our hotel on day three as we packed our luggage into the minibuses and headed for Bajo Guadalquivir and Doñana. Huge open rice fields in winter sodden wet and at first sight lifeless burst into life when you look a little closer. Small birds zip from the field edge to the remaining rice stalks and onto the furrowed land, in complete contrast to their Spring arrival further north in three months the thousands of **Common Chiffchaff** feed on the ground along road edges and muddy puddles. As we approached our first stop at Brazo del Este we had already added **Lapwing** and **Golden Plover** to our growing trip list. A **Black Stork** was picked out further across the rain soaked field, then two **White Stork**, quickly followed by a **Marsh Harrier** drifting along a line between field and marsh.

We rounded the road and drove alongside the river to the edge of a small marsh and the birds began to come thick and fast. More **Black-winged Stilt** over a hundred easily back in the main field, 5-10 **Avocet** adding to the melee. A 20 strong flock of **Glossy Ibis** took off and landed 100metres into the pool oblivious to our presence then a shout '**Purple Gallinule**' as a single bird gingerly ran across 20metres from us. Two more were discovered on the opposite bank of the river a little later. A small party of **Common Snipe** circled in formation. Most of the group headed along the track into the field, I broke off into the opposite direction toward a small flock of birds feeding on the road. **House Sparrow**, **Corn Bunting** and several **Crested Lark** were flighty but offered good scope views. The occasional **Yellow-legged Gull** and **Marsh Harrier** made their way along the opposite bank of the river and the heaviest showers of the day hit. Moving back to the minibus and with the others still some distance up the track I stopped to watch a procession of **Chiffchaff** and **Black Redstart** move into a tiny roadside copse.



Black Redstart

Looking closer a male **Spanish Sparrow** perched midway up before a movement on the ground caught my eye and I discovered the only **Wryneck** of the trip feeding in the lea of the copse. We headed off in the easing rain, picking up sightings of all three egret species, **Cattle Egret**, **Little Egret** and a single **Great White Egret**, as we wound our way between ditches and fields from one group of fields to another. A large flock of eight-ten **purple Gallinule** in a stubble field scattered as we juddered to a halt for photographs.

Even stopping for the toilet provided no rest as those of us with stronger bladders picked off a dark phase **Booted Eagle** drifting past as we waited.

Our next destination at **Los Olivillos** showed immediate promise with at least three **Marsh Harrier** flying as we arrived. The first pipits of our trip mixed it with the Chiffchaff in the field, most were **Meadow Pipit** but one of our party saw a single **Water Pipit**. The walk along the road toward the main lagoon here added another **Zitting Cisticola** as well as more **Common Stonechat**. The main lagoon was carpeted with wildfowl with probably 1000 birds made up of **Mallard**, **Shoveler**, **Common Pochard** and **Red-crested Pochard**. A small number of *sinensis* **Cormorant** warmed themselves on overhanging branches and several hirundines, **House Martin** and **Swallow** hawked over the back of the pool for all the world like it was a Spring day. Another shout this time an **Osprey** that obligingly re-appeared moments later *sans* fish from one of the other lagoons. Back at the minibus one of our sharp eyed number scoping the field edge first located a **Grey Wagtail**, then more surprisingly a **Bluethroat** which was joined minutes later by another feeding on the sodden mud amongst the hordes of Chiffchaff.

Re-tracing our steps to cross the river and head for our picnic stop we added three **Hoopoe** as well as *meridionalis* **Great Grey Shrike**. A few **Black-headed Gull** perched on a small boat in the Guadalquivir river probably went unnoticed by most as thoughts turned to lunch.

Our group took the opportunity at lunch to wander into the pine forest at Aznalcázar, **Sardinian Warbler** called invisibly from the lower growth and several **Crested Tit** were located in the taller pines. Some of the party walked further in to this accessible forest and stumbled upon a small family group of **Azure-winged Magpie** rushing away and landing Treecreeper-like on pine trunks as they went.

Post-lunch and back out into the open areas of Doñana the flooded rice fields yielded more waders with a large flock of wintering **Dunlin** that also produced a single **Little Stint** for the diligent few that worked through the flock. Here **Waxbills** flitted in the roadside vegetation and **Corn Bunting** perched on bush tops and roadside wires. The latter gave us uninhibited views and photographic opportunities of two superb species, first **Great Grey Shrike** of the beautiful *meridionalis* race that the Dutch have separated into a new species 'Southern Grey Shrike'.

This race has a diffuse pink wash on the breast and a small white line above the mask. Perhaps 100metres further with the photographers riding side door open as if on safari one of the much hoped for species **Black-winged Kite** posed briefly as we approached before completing a close flyby of both minibus, one of the highlights of the trip.

A single distant **Common Crane** was to be my only sighting of this species on the trip due to flight times although others within the group connected with many hundreds on the last day.



Great Grey Shrike

A slow drive along the river checking Tamarisk trees for roosting **Night Heron** initially seemed destined to produce only post-perched **Common Buzzard**, but our guides again did not let us down as we found first a juvenile and then perhaps 30 of these small heron roosting in a 100metre stretch. A visit to a private farm pool to look for Ferruginous Duck was unsuccessful for that species but we did see more **Serin**, another **Zitting Cisticola**, more hirundines and a single **Tufted Duck**.

Dusk found us searching in vain for calling **Eagle Owl** but it was only the smaller and commoner **Tawny Owl** that was vocal. The area through which we passed was a key site for Lynx but despite spending a good hour looking we were not to catch a glimpse of this enigmatic and beautiful cat.

Our hotel 'Olongtigi' was a splendid establishment with a small courtyard and 'houses' containing three rooms in each arranged around it. Much list comparison was done that night over Whisky and a log fire.

Day 4 17th December 2009

Greeted by early morning fog we headed back off into the mountains this time to the area of Sierra Norte. Once we had risen above the fog we began to wind our way through some superb dehesa habitat offering tantalizing glimpses of **Little Owl**, more **Azure-winged Magpie** proving very elusive to get a good look at as they flashed away through the Holm Oaks offering only brief glimpses darting between thick leafy branches just out of reach. A large over flying skein of birds prompted an impromptu roadside stop before we determined that they were **Cormorant** heading east. Further up at our first watch point we were assaulted by the screams of a pair of **Jay**.

Had we known what awaited us at the 'Wolf' watchpoint we would perhaps not have lingered so long. We could see as we approached numbers of **Griffon Vulture** in the air but after a steady scan across the Sierra Morena we realized that there were many more on a nearby hillside and a further group soaring in the northwest.

As we waited and watched more and more took to the air and then a shout to look in the opposite direction as another large raptor soared toward us, then another, not Vultures but Eagles. With all eyes on these two birds they were quickly identified as a juvenile **Spanish Imperial Eagle** and a **Golden Eagle**. We watched in amazement as they circled above our heads and over into the melee of Griffon Vulture soaring closer and closer, some of the lower vultures at eye level height out over the dehesa, another superb highlight of the trip. Added spice a few minutes later when a single **Black Vulture** was picked out amongst the distant group which once located was easily separable from the Griffons by the obvious colour of the feet.

A **Grey Fox** seen by half the group making its way down one of the steep grassy slopes was an extra bonus for those that saw it.

Our picnic lunch in a tiny picnic area by a small stream that we would never have found without local knowledge gave us a well earned rest although **Grey Wagtail** and a splendid **Hawfinch** were ample reward to those that kept the optics close by. At this point the group split up to wander along some of the wooded pathways. I took the opportunity to walk back up the road a way to try and get some pictures of another family group of **Azure-winged Magpie** we had flushed as we drove down the hill. Perhaps 5-10 fed amongst dense young trees in a walled area that had once been the garden of a substantial, but now run down, water mill. With patience I was able to take some record shots of this beautiful bird as one or two individuals fed by the roadside and around the tree bases. Here **Black Redstart** and **Stonechat** offered further close photo opportunities, with patience and some of the group found **Short-toed Treecreeper**. A **Great Spotted**

Woodpecker called nearby but was not seen.



Griffon Vulture

Our final destination provided perhaps the strangest landscape of the trip in the form of the stone peaks of Cerro del Hierro, an old mineral quarry filled with caves and scrubby growth. Within minutes of arrival a male **Blue Rock Thrush**, the first of three, was picked out on the edge of one of the pinnacle shaped rocks. **Black Redstart** were popping up everywhere and apart from the ubiquitous House Sparrow were the commonest bird here. Again the group split and went separate ways, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** was the unexpected result for one party, **Crested Lark**, **Meadow Pipit** and some lively **Serin** were the best I could manage.

Despite an absence of **Rock Bunting** our main target for this site the day ended with a group picture followed by a brief stop for coffee and beer (and **Cattle Egret** flying to roost) then a super evening meal with our guides and their employer.



Serin