

FIVE DAYS OFF THE ‘BEATEN TRACK’ IN SPAIN – MAY 2002

by

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Spain is one of the largest countries in Europe in terms of landmass and has a great diversity of habitats, from the high mountains of the Pyrenees in the north to the marshes and estuarine areas in the south, perhaps notably the celebrated Coto Donana and the Guadalquivir river. In between the two extremes lie many regions, some of which may be less well known to potential visitors but that are equally bird rich and beautiful. IAN FORSYTH and STEVE HOLLIDAY have visited Spain on many previous occasions, indeed Steve lived in Gibraltar during 1986 to 1990, though neither had ever visited the Sierra de Aracena region. Although Steve had made one previous ‘pilgrimage’ to Extremadura many years previously, this trip provided the anticipation every birder feels when going somewhere new. Ian and Steve provide an insight to their experiences (both birding and culinary!) from a short trip in the spring of 2002 to some of these areas.

On 5th May we were met at Malaga airport by our friends from Gibraltar, Clive and Geraldine Finlayson and John and Janet Licudi and set off in two vehicles inland towards our first destination, in southwest Spain. Along the way, a brief stop was made at Laguna Dulce, a small nature reserve near Campillos with a hide overlooking the lake. Here we encountered our first reminders of some of the birdlife typical of southern Spain: 60 Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber*, 30 Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*, several Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*, Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*, Gull-billed *Sterna nilotica* and Whiskered Terns *Chlidonias hybridus*, Eurasian Marsh *Circus aeruginosus* and Montagu’s Harriers *Circus pygargus* quartering the fields beyond the lake, Cetti’s Warbler *Cettia cetti* and the incessant buzzing song of a Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* overhead.

SIERRA DE ARACENA

We travelled westwards via Osuna and Seville to Aracena and finally to the small village of Carboneras for a two-night stay in a rural hotel, the Finca Valbono sited almost 700m a.s.l.. Carboneras is situated in woodland, part of the remaining ‘Atlantic forest’ region of southern Spain and Portugal, where many ‘northern’ species reach their southern limits. The area around our hotel bore a more than passing resemblance to a wooded valley of central Wales and some of the birds, Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Blue *Parus caeruleus*, Great *Parus major* and Long-tailed Tits *Aegithalos caudatus*, Wood Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*, Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* and Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* leant credence to the illusion. Only the sightings of an occasional Hoopoe *Upupa epops*, Eurasian Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*, Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* and nest-building Melodious Warblers *Hippolais polyglotta* gave the game away. Also, the sweet song of the Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* filled the air everywhere, the Kites were Black *Milvus migrans* and the Starlings Spotless *Sturnus unicolor*. That evening the culinary delights in Aracena included goats cheese, cuttlefish, snails in a red wine sauce and the world famous locally cured ham, jabugo.

Next day we started out early for the small village of Aroche and then headed north to survey the birds and habitat in an area near La Contienda, close to the border with Portugal. As part of an ongoing study, Clive had chosen a convenient loop along minor roads to survey transects of habitat. Basically, this involved our stopping at various points along the route every 2-4 kms for between 5-10 minutes and logging all birds seen whilst Gerry recorded the vegetation and height of the terrain. The height and subsequent mapping of the surveyed area was provided by using a Global Positioning System (GPS) which uses various satellites to

obtain latitude and longitude. All the information gathered would later be fed into a computer to add to Clive's database on the birds of Spain.

During the course of the day we surveyed 18 such transects covering a wide variety of habitats at between 275-650 metres a.s.l, including open grassy areas with scattered Cork Oaks, Olive groves, riverine (Rio Murtiga), rock rose scrub, eucalyptus stands and poplars near water. The whole area was peaceful and quiet with little or no sign of any human disturbance to wildlife. In some places there were meadows densely carpeted with a rich variety of beautiful wild flowers and almost everywhere was the song of the Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*. Other commoner species on the route were Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*, Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*, Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae*, European Serin *Serinus serinus*, Red-rumped Swallow and Common Nightingale and we encountered the occasional Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*, Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*, Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*, Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*, Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*, Eurasian Golden Oriole, European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* and Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyana*, to name but a few. A late afternoon lunch saw us again enjoying the famous Spanish jamon at its origin, the village of Jabugo. An evening meal at the same restaurant as last night saw us eating octopus, black pudding, cuttlefish etc, washed down by some excellent Rioja!

EXTREMADURA

The following morning we set out northwards for the province of Extremadura, crossing the Sierra Morena, a significant range of mountains traversing much of southern Spain from east to west. The northern edge of the Sierra Morena gives way to lower hills and then by the town of Zafra to flatter, open country much of which is well-cultivated to as far as Merida. Then we drove further north, noticing how signs of cultivation declined as limestone outcrops appeared, including Holm Oak scatterings and some vines. Passing Trujillo we eventually took the EX 208 road to the Hotel Montfrague, situated just north of the village of Torrejon el Rubio and arrived there in early afternoon. After checking in, we surveyed the Holm Oak meadow country to the southwest during the late afternoon and were not disappointed by the variety of species found there or thereabouts.

Black Kite, Common Raven *Corvus corax*, Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*, Short-toed Eagle, Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*, Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Red Kite *Milvus milvus* and European Bee-eater all featured strongly amongst a supporting cast dominated by larks and the ubiquitous Corn Bunting. Thekla, Crested and Wood Larks seemed to be all over, their songs often intermingling. Five Black Vultures *Aegypius monachus*, drifting low and directly overhead in loose formation, was a memorable experience, as were the repeated sightings of Azure-winged Magpies. Clive has a particular interest in the latter species, studying its distribution and habitat preferences in Iberia, so it was pleasing to see it at virtually every stop.

Later in the day, we descended to look at the grassy plains north of Caceres— bustard country! These vast areas stretch as far as the eye can see and at first may seem unlikely settings for much in the way of birds. Quite the reverse is true, in fact, as the relative lack of disturbance encourages many species that are scarce or absent elsewhere to breed here. Calandra Larks *Melanocorypha calandra* were prominent, with European Roller *Coracias garrulus*, Montagu's Harrier, Southern Grey Shrike, Black-bellied Pterocles *orientalis* and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*, Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*, Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* and several small flocks of Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*. We did not have to wait too long to find Great Bustard *Otis tarda* and totalled 4 males and a particularly obliging female. Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* was more tricky, possibly due to the now stiff breeze, and our views on this occasion were limited to a couple of head and neck shots of males, but we were fortunate enough to hear the remarkable call.

Our hotel was situated fairly close to a steep rocky escarpment to the north, our destination the next morning. After pausing en route to view Spanish Sparrows nesting in telegraph poles at Arroyo de la Vid, we drove to the Castillo de Monfrague, a ruined 12th century Moorish castle sited at the western end. Here, as well as spectacular views, we found dozens of Griffon Vultures hunched on a nearby cliff, Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* and Red-rumped Swallow. Later at the nearby Salto del Gitano ('jump of the gypsy') we encountered at least 80 Griffons on the cliffs, including some young at the nest, a pair of Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* feeding chicks, Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* and Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* feeding fledged young. We explored further up the Embalse de Torrejon and saw a pair of Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* at the nest, along with others in flight and more Griffons and Black Vultures. Lunch at the park's only 'tourist' spot saw us sample the local Rabbit, a superb garlic soup and an excellent chestnut flambeau.

In the evening, we visited the mediaeval town of Trujillo for some light shopping. The ancient square is dominated by a gigantic bronze statue of Francesco Pizzarro, former local swine-herder turned infamous conquistador. White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* seemed to be nesting on every rooftop and half a dozen Lesser Kestrels floated around the castle at the top. It is not difficult to appreciate the strategic importance of this place in the past, affording as it does a breathtaking 360 degrees panorama over the surrounding plains. A few more transects were surveyed on the return journey to the hotel, providing 'new' species such as Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* and Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* and more Azure-winged Magpies. On our last morning in the area, 9th May we decided to concentrate our efforts on raptors in the general area of Monfrague with particular emphasis on finding Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*. This Iberian endemic proved very elusive and we had to settle for distant sightings of one, possibly two. Good views of many other raptors, including Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* and a Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*, at the southern limit of its range, provided compensation along with Crested Tit *Parus cristatus* and Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata*. After a picnic lunch overlooking the Salto del Gitano area it was time to head to Gibraltar. Our five days in some of the most under-watched areas of Spain proved both mouth-watering and memorable indeed!