

## BIRD TRIP REPORT

### Extremadura 21st - 28th April 2007

Birdseekers and Boletas Birdwatching Centre

Leaders: Josele Saíz & Steve West

Participants: Brian, Brian, Brian, Jeremy, Carol, Neville, Andy, John

Weather: Warm and sunny in the beginning of the week, turning to overcast with rainy spells in the latter half. Daytime maximum temperatures ranging from about 18°C to 27°C.

#### Introduction:

Extremadura is a large autonomous region in western Spain, bordering Portugal. Despite its excellent, often empty roads, Extremadura is a relatively poor and undeveloped area by Spanish standards, and is very rural in nature. This is evident to the visitor in the tranquillity and beautiful landscapes which seem to have remained unchanged for hundreds of years, and which can enchant and captivate the naturalist like few other places in western Europe.

Spring is undoubtedly the best time of year to be birding around Extremadura. The *dehesa*, that unique and bird-rich habitat of open cork oak woods, is literally carpeted with wild flowers of all colours, as too are large tracts of the rolling plains of la Serena. With a backdrop of the ruins of Moorish castles perched on rocky outcrops, the overriding sensations of Extremadura are its pervading peace and birdsong.

This was planned as an easy-paced tour with emphasis on quality observations, while at the same time aiming to see all the specialities of the region. It was divided into two parts, with two centres of a very different character, but at both there was always a bird to look at. The first home base was at a family run hotel in Quintana de la Serena, well-situated for rapid access to the marvellous steppes of la Serena. The second base was in an excellent rural hotel in the secluded village of Serrejón, on the edge of the Natural Park of Monfragüe.

The trip day by day

#### **Day 1: Madrid to Quintana de la Serena**

Because of different arrival times at Madrid airport our party split into two, the first 4 going with Steve to Oropesa where they would wait at the Parador for the remaining 6 coming with Josele. However, some improvising was needed as there was a Medieval festival being held at Oropesa and it was not possible to park in the town.

A walk through the town had us all feeling we had forgotten our tunics and frocks, but on arrival at the magnificent Parador we started to feel that we were back in our element. A large number of **Lesser Kestrels** were flying around the walls of the parador, giving us all a warm introduction to birding this part of Spain. In between bites

of cake that Andy and Steve had bought from a fair maiden on one of the stalls we set to studying the diagnostic features of this species in comparison to the Common Kestrel, as well as looking at **Spotless Starling**, Jackdaw, Linnet, **Serin** and numerous **White Storks**.

A quick phone call changed arrangements and so we started along a nearby road in search of one of the area's specialities. Before long we had seen **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Bee-eater**, **Fan-tailed Warbler**, **Griffon Vulture**, **Black Kite**, **Nightingale**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Corn Bunting** and **Montagu's Harrier**, before meeting up with the main party. Amid the initial greetings we immediately set eyes on our target bird, the charismatic **Black-winged Kite**. Brian and Brian saw three of these birds, although the other lesser mortals had to make do with a single bird! Immediately after a handsome male Montagu's Harrier drifted close by and keen-sighted Jeremy, the youngest of the group, also spotted **Collared Pratincoles**.

Satisfied, and after a quick look at Bee-eaters we continued the drive to our hotel in La Serena area. Black Kites, Griffon Vultures and White Storks were the most obvious birds en route, although there was also an **Egyptian Vulture**, **Red Kite**, **Booted Eagle** and a brief look at a male **Little Bustard** and two **Red-legged Partridges** just outside Villanueva de la Serena.

Time was getting on, stomachs were rumbling, not yet prepared for Spanish mealtimes, but there was one last stop that had to be done before reaching our hotel. A beautiful **Roller** was perched on a wire close to the roadside, and we looked on enviously as he dispatched with his dinner, a large juicy-looking grasshopper. Unexpectedly he was joined by another Roller, and even before reaching the hotel we had seen 3 of these amazingly brightly coloured birds.

A wedding reception was being held at the hotel on our arrival; we declined the invitation to the reception, although the wedding cake itself was a temptation that some could not resist!

## **Day 2: La Serena plains and the River Zújar**

Spotless Starling and Serin were seen from the hotel car park before setting out for our first stop on the Castuera plains. This was a disused iron mine surrounded by a great variety of birds. After the inevitable Corn Bunting we had soon detected our first singing **Calandra Larks** and had only time to jump out of the vehicles before 6 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** flew up and gradually away into the distance giving their characteristic "ga-gang" flight calls.

A short walk ensued and everyone was soon familiar with **Little Bustards**, particularly after watching a displaying male spotted by Jeremy, its foot stamping and leaping into the air providing entertainment for all. A **Quail** called briefly, typically concealed in the grass nearby, while 2 **Stone Curlews** allowed us all good telescope views. So too did the first of many **Montagu's Harriers** to be seen in this area. Several **Red-billed Choughs** protested noisily at our presence. An immaculate **Black-eared Wheatear** was widely appreciated and a **Little Owl** cooperated by perching on a mound of stones for all to see.

Brian (Fred) started to realise that one way to make Spanish birds fly away was to point a camera at them! Meanwhile Jeremy and his father Brian gave us an introduction to the life cycle of the interesting oil beetle which was quite abundant in the area.

Setting our sights on better views of sandgrouse we moved to another steppe area nearby, with good views of **Southern Grey Shrike** on the way, and sure enough Pin-tailed Sandgrouse could be heard, and were seen briefly in flight by some. At the next stop we looked on as not one but four male **Little Bustards** displayed from their different territories in the area around the vehicles.

It was now time for lunch and a change of scenery, so we drove to the River Zújar to have our picnic while watching a non-stop procession of birds including Red-rumped Swallow, **Crag Martin**, **Booted Eagle** (both dark and light phase birds together), Griffon Vulture, **Egyptian Vulture**, Bee-eater and our first contact with **Black Vulture**. As we munched into our sandwiches we also had time to digest Josele's words: in spring in Extremadura there is never a moment, and a hardly a tree, bush or wire, not holding a bird to look at.

Among the **Little Egrets** and **Cattle Egrets** down by the river Brian the younger had seen a bird which he was sure was a **Great White Egret**, a rare bird in these parts, although by now it had flown upriver and out of sight. A few **Penduline Tits** calling from trees near the bridge kept us alert during our picnic lunch, but because of the wind they kept under cover and were seen by some only briefly. Something similar occurred with the **Great Reed Warbler**, **Great Spotted Cuckoo** and **Golden Oriole**, all of which could be heard much more easily than they were seen. Both **Green Sandpiper** and **Common Sandpiper** were seen on the river and eventually Brian's observation of the Great White Egret was confirmed as it was seen by all the group flying in the trail of a large group of Cattle Egrets.

A short coffee break was followed by another riverside stop. Here, apart from a number of colourful bee-eaters and singing Nightingales there was also a small but (very chatty) colony of **Spanish Sparrows**, 2 **Little Ringed Plovers** and a **Greenshank**.

It was now mid-afternoon and it was getting hot, so we decided to head back to the hotel and continue later after a siesta. We would need some rest in preparation for the excitement to come!

It was windy when we got out of the vans at the first site of the late afternoon. However, **Thekla Larks** showed themselves on the hillsides and Jeremy and Brian had soon identified the European Pond Turtles visible in a nearby stream. Our main reason for being there though was to look for the attractive **Spectacled Warbler**, a very localised species in these parts. We waited and before too long two birds were heard calling. After an initial mix-up with the names everyone was watching a handsome male Spectacled Warbler at close range and insistently laying claim to his particular bit of hillside in Extremadura. An excellent encounter!

At the same site a **Melodious Warbler** was also briefly viewed by some of the party, but we had to move on to our evening appointment with one of the most spectacular, impressive and emblematic birds of la Serena, the Great Bustard.

That's all very well, but it's almost impossible not to stop en route when you spot a grandiose **Short-toed Eagle** perched on a pylon by the side of the road and 4 **Collared Pratincoles** flying over a ploughed field!

Arriving at a site known well to Josele we had views of a distant flock of **Great Bustards**, but that was not the kind of contact with the species that we had come here for. So we drove out to the road intending to take another track to get closer views of these marvellous birds. The occupants of the second vehicle unexpectedly came across 4 males close to the road and in excellent light, and so just had to stop. Josele's vehicle was immediately called back so that everyone had a fair chance of sharing in the experience of seeing these magnificent birds at such close range. The bustards, seemingly unperturbed by our presence, walked calmly and nonchalantly a little up the rise, more interested in feeding than in anything we could do to or for them.

That seemed like a very hard act to follow, but we had learned to have faith in Josele's judgement, and so follow it we did. Shortly we were overlooking fields with at least 40 **Great Bustards**! Including a small number of displaying "foam bath" males, one of which was being attended by 3 females. An unforgettable sight!

And there's more. A few Montagu's Harriers, Calandra Larks and 2 Stone Curlews were also thrown in for good measure, along with displaying **Short Toed Larks** and brief views of flying sandgrouse, both Pin-tailed and **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**. The quintessence of the marvellous Serena steppes at just one site.

Returning to the hotel the Short-toed Eagle turned its head to glance at us, still perched on the same pylon where we had seen it around two hours earlier!

### **Day 3: Benquerencia, Sierra de Tiros and La Serena plains**

Some of us started the day with a bit of sleep dust in the eyes still, which we quickly rubbed away when we saw Josele's van going the wrong way around a roundabout! Soon after that the sunny skies and gently rolling countryside loaded with spring had put us in the mood for the day's birding as we reached our first site at Benquerencia.

A short walk took us up the hill from the village to the ruins of a Moorish castle, allowing us to admire the stork's nest on the church bell tower and to be barked at by the local dogs. A relaxed visit of an hour or so to this attractive site allowed all to enjoy good views of a **Black Wheatear**, a pair of confiding **Thekla Larks** (an excellent opportunity to get to grips with the fine distinctions between this species and the Crested Lark), **Alpine Swifts**, 2 **Blue Rock Thrushes**, Red-rumped Swallows, and brief views of our first **Rock Bunting** of the trip.

A short drive around the nearby fields and into the *dehesa* was to follow, and with it close views of a largish group of **Spanish Sparrows** and an all-too-brief aural contact with a singing **Orphean Warbler** and Golden Oriole. In the fields on the way back to the village we stopped briefly and saw several Calandra Larks, **Crested Larks** and, albeit distantly, Short-toed Larks.

From here we drove to a nearby sierra, stopping briefly en route to look at Short-toed Eagle, Egyptian Vulture and Griffon Vulture in flight. Josele tested Neville on his Black

Kite flight identification (we won't reveal the results!). Opposite the Sierra de Tiros we pulled off the road and scanned for Bonelli's Eagle, but two **Golden Eagles** appeared in their place! Unfortunately that was not a good sign for the Bonelli's Eagle as the Goldies tend to compete for nest sites, ousting them from their former territories. Another smart Black-eared Wheatear was observed before lunch-time was called.

In the grounds of the well-kept hermitage of Belén we sat and had our picnic lunch to the constant chirruping of mixed flocks of Spanish Sparrow and House Sparrow. Coffee followed and then a short walk nearby during which we saw **Turtle Dove, Woodlark** and tantalising views of **Sardinian Warbler, Subalpine Warbler** and **Orphean Warbler**.

The day's birding was rounded off by brief stops at the foot of the Sierra de Tiros and then by a ploughed field where we admired the elegance of no less than 11 **Collared Pratincoles**.

#### Day 4: La Serena plains, the Sierra Brava reservoir, Trujillo and Serrejón

Today we would be on the move, although we didn't have very far to go to our hotel in Serrejón, where we would spend the next four nights. Therefore the plan was to take things easy while seeing as many interesting birds and sites on the way as our well-planned itinerary would allow us.

One of the most memorable birding moments of the whole day was provided early on, before leaving the wonderful plains of la Serena. Josele led us to an area which he knew to be a good one for observing displaying **Montagu's Harriers**, and sure enough we managed to see several of these graceful raptors, including a melanistic bird. But that was not all. We had chanced on a drinking pool for sandgrouse and, localising the birds by their calls, we managed to track them down to get great views of at least 15 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, many of them on the ground. 6 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** were also observed, along with **Collared Pratincoles**, a **Hobby** and three **Short-toed Eagles**. What a way to say goodbye to the plains!

En route we passed an impressive roadside colony of Lesser Kestrels and White Storks and then made a halt to watch a pair of **Rollers** and a **Fan-tailed Warbler**, one of the few of those clockwork zitters that actually let itself be photographed. Following that, the main highlights of an agricultural area were a small flock of **Gull-billed Terns**, numerous Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes and a **Quail** which burst into flight from under Josele's feet. If there had been water in the fields as there had in previous years this area would have held a good variety and number of waders.

Our picnic lunches were eaten at the Sierra Brava reservoir, many of us looking for the scant shade offered by the vans in the increasing heat. A couple of hours later the temperature would reach 27°C. Here there were more Gull-billed Terns, some Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls, Great Crested Grebes and a couple of Gadwall.

At Trujillo we celebrated arriving before the annual cheese festival (more for reasons of easy access more than for the pervading cheesy smell). Once in the central square the main exercise was to separate the scarcer **Pallid Swift** from the many Common Swifts. Sooner than expected everyone had managed to identify a Pallid Swift for themselves in

what turned out to be a more fulfilling pastime than Steve had led us to believe it would be!

From here we drove slowly across the plains around Belén, a site well known to many foreign birders. There was a large Cattle Egret colony and good numbers of Griffon Vultures circling low overhead, accompanied by a single **Black Vulture**, which helped to provide useful identification practice. Josele's van was ahead, leading the way, but something suddenly came between us that made it unthinkable not to stop. Two **Great Spotted Cuckoos**! And both perched in a bush by the side of the road some 10 metres in front of us. We got on the walkie-talkies and urged Josele to come back, while enjoying first class views of these two fantastic birds. As Josele approached from the opposite direction the cuckoos concealed themselves in the same bush they had been perching in, and it wasn't until they flew into a nearby tree that the occupants of the van got to see them in all their splendour.

From that point it was easy to drive the remaining distance to Serrejón and to offer the opportunity of finishing the days birding on a particularly high note. There were still some, however, who managed to squeeze in an evening walk around the village before dinner. And then after dinner to see the village's resident Barn Owls. Some people never have enough!

#### **Day 5: Monfragüe Natural Park, Arrocampo reservoir**

A quick glance out of the window confirmed the weather forecast – we had some rain in store. But of course we could hardly stay indoors when there were so many great birds to be seen.

Before entering the park proper we stopped at a bridge where those of the group who hadn't already seen **Azure-winged Magpies** were awarded with good views of these quaint birds.

The first port of call in the Natural Park was la Portilla which, with **Eagle Owl** (a chick), Blue Rock Thrush, Red-rumped Swallow, Griffon Vulture, Black Vulture and the scarce **Black Stork**, was an excellent introduction to the birds of Monfragüe even if it did rain. Fortunately new hides have been built at the key observation sites and so there was no need to stand out in the open getting wet.

Stopping next at the dam the only bird of note was an **Egyptian Vulture** perched on the rocks and looking like an unhappy chicken. Dampened somewhat we made our way to Villarreal de San Carlos for coffee and comfort.

We made our way back to the hotel, passing a **Night Heron** at the bridge. After lunch the weather improved enough for us to grasp the opportunity for a quick visit to the Arrocampo reservoir. Here there were also new hides, and with a bit of luck they may well be unlocked in the near future!

Our visit to Arrocampo was short but sweet. Almost immediately we had spotted a male **Little Bittern** walking along the water's edge, and this was followed by sightings of **Purple Gallinule** (or was it Swamphehen?), **Purple Heron**, a **Savi's Warbler** reeling away at the top of a reed stem, and a **Kingfisher**. A strange, pale-looking bird perched

in a tamarisk bush attracted our attention and had us scratching our heads for a while, until it was agreed that the only thing it could be was a young **Penduline Tit** just out of the nest. The leaders' identification was confirmed (and their reputation upheld) as first one parent bird and then the other came to feed their offspring, and then two more young were also found. This family of perky little birds managed to hold everyone's attention for a considerable length of time, after all it isn't every day that you see up to five **Penduline Tits** in a single bush, is it?

Crossing the road we scanned the reeds and found a **Great Reed Warbler** and several **Night Herons** in flight. John was wiping his spectacles again, was it the relative humidity or the excitement that made him do it? Happy at having made such a good use of our time we headed back towards the hotel, just as the first drops of rain began to patter on the windscreen.

### **Day 6: Miravete, Jaraicejo, Monfragüe Natural Park**

The morning clouds looked threatening but for now the rain had declared a truce. We headed towards Miravete, intent on making the most of the time we had.

Our first stop this morning was at a bridge where before long the keen-eyed among the group had already had brief views of several **Hawfinches** and a **Golden Oriole**. A little further on we saw a nice male **Subalpine Warbler** and were treated to rare views of a Nightingale singing from the top of a bush.

We continued along the N-V road which we had entirely to ourselves – a wide road, not a car in sight, and here and there with grass growing along the middle! Such a road could be considered a waste of resources if you like, but it was ideal for travelling birders!

The next stop revealed a singing **Cirl Bunting** and a collection of the more usual raptors, although we had not yet seen either Bonelli's Eagle or Spanish Imperial Eagle, two of our remaining target birds. However, we felt sure that the best was yet to come.

A little distance further along this birder's highway we searched for Orphean Warbler, and indeed managed to see **Orphean Warbler**, **Woodlark**, **Azure-winged Magpie** and **Rock Sparrow** all at one site. This was followed by a good look at a couple of quite co-operative **Dartford Warblers** at a nearby location before the call of the wild was overcome by the call of the hungry stomach. At our carefully selected shady picnic site complete with stream there was a singing **Melodious Warbler**, and raptors including **Booted Eagle**.

The approach to the southern side of the Natural Park was punctuated by coffees and ice-creams, Azure-winged Magpies, Rock Sparrows and a large number of raptors, including several **Short-toed Eagles**. After a shower of rain we walked up the steps that led to the Moorish castle of Monfragüe, many using the shepherd's walk (stop every few steps and look behind for the sheep!). A **Black Redstart** showed briefly, but we never once set eyes on the Short-toed Treecreeper that had been singing in a tree and teasing Andy and Steve for the last half hour! At the top, the heights of the castle gave us splendid views of the surrounding terrain, and here we saw a couple of distant Alpine Swifts, Red-billed Choughs, Red-rumped Swallows and vultures at close range.

We carried on through the park, all the time scanning the skies for those elusive eagles. While crossing the dam the second vehicle stopped and the occupants rushed out to grab their telescopes. What was it? “2 Bonelli’s Eagles!” called Steve over the walkie-talkie with a great sense of urgency. The van duly stopped, everyone got out and looked at the two eagles, and...and... “Er, sorry folks, they’re not Bonelli’s after all, they’re Short-toed Eagles” apologised a rather embarrassed Steve.

Making the most of the unprogrammed stop Jeremy spotted a pair of Azure-winged Magpies on the nest and while everyone was watching their comings and goings Josele shouted “Bonelli’s Eagles! Come on everybody! Quick!” Everyone obeyed and rushed to get scope views of the two **Bonelli’s Eagles** that were flying together in exactly the same place as Steve had seen the Short-toed Eagles, only 15 minutes previously. Strange, but true!

These two marvellous eagles performed really well for the group, soaring on the growing thermals, slowly drifting out of view after everybody had seen them to their satisfaction. High-spirited after this encounter we continued towards la Portilla. Half-way there Steve spotted a bird on a pylon, but this time cautiously asked for second opinions before shouting out its identity. “Oh, it’s a Raven” came the reply, both from Josele and from Andy. “A Raven?” thought Steve, “How could that possibly be a Raven?”. Acting decisively he stopped the car and scoped the bird, actually revealing that it was an immature **Golden Eagle**! “Oh! So you were looking at a bird on the **second** pylon, not the first!” came the reply.

The sun was shining through the clouds when we got to la Portilla, where a considerable number of foreign birders had gathered. Stepping out of the car we saw that the two **Bonelli’s Eagles** had followed us to la Portilla, and were now circling with a number of vultures and **Black Storks**. Another piece of good news was that the adult **Eagle Owl** had been located and was out in the open for all to see. In plain daylight! What a bird, and what a luxury to be able to see it that way! We were ecstatic to see this marvellous bird and paid it the attention it deserved, although Brian was distracted a little by the dimensions of a Frenchman’s photographic apparatus.

Then, almost too soon, someone called out “Imperial Eagle”. Working quickly scopes and binoculars were duly trained onto an adult **Spanish Imperial Eagle** in flight. The bird was a little distant but Carol and Steve were following its progress. It was easily recognisable for its silhouette and the white leading edges of the wing which could be seen when the bird turned.

Three eagles species in half an hour, and five in one day! Including one of the world’s rarest raptors! Now that’s a very hard act to beat anywhere else in Europe.

#### Day 7: Serrejón, Monfragüe Natural Park, Arrocampo reservoir

A pleasant pre-breakfast walk on the edge of the village took us along a lane fringed by beautiful moss and flower covered stone walls and through a rural scene that must hardly have changed in the last 100 years. We saw a good variety of small birds including **Cirl Bunting**, Woodlark, **Sardinian warbler**, Short-toed Treecreeper and **Azure-winged Magpie**.

After breakfast we headed back into the park, firstly stopping briefly at the bridge where we recorded Great Spotted Woodpecker and Nuthatch. Then we took a walk through a Cork Oak *dehesa* and sunny fields carpeted with flowers, including many **Tongue Orchids**. Josele explained that if approached by a raging bull we could run and jump up a tree, so there was no reason to be deterred by the “Beware Dangerous Cattle” signs (he was joking of course,... wasn’t he?).

Black Vultures were flying with the more numerous Griffon Vultures and Black Kites, while closer to the ground we saw **Rock Sparrow**, Garden Warbler, Azure-winged Magpie and an elusive **Golden Oriole**. Suddenly a **Spanish Imperial Eagle** appeared and at a much closer range than the previous day’s sighting. As we were watching it swooped down to see off a Black Vulture which was obviously getting to close to its territory. A great show!

Next we stopped briefly at la Portilla, but there was no sign of the adult Eagle Owl, which prompted comments of how lucky we had been to see it the previous day. From here we approached our designated picnic site, where Josele drove the van down to prepare for our arrival. We followed him on foot down the beautiful slopes, bedecked with French lavender and other colourful flowers and shrubs. An **Orphean Warbler** was seen well, and so too was a pretty **Spanish Festoon** butterfly.

Our picnic site was characteristically shady, cool and tranquil. And with a good variety of birds including Subalpine warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Spotted Flycatcher, Short-toed Eagle and Bee-eater. After the group photo and a coffee stop we retraced our steps back to Serrjón but not before seeing 6 **Black Storks** at la Portilla.

Josele had developed toothache overnight and was suffering the consequences but that didn’t prevent us from visiting Arrocampo again. The array of birds was very similar to those seen on the previous visit, with the unexpected addition of two **Spoonbills**.

That evening we had dinner promptly in preparation for our last bit of birding of the trip. From the village we drove along dusty tracks, past tree frogs until eventually we heard the characteristic knocking call of two **Red-necked Nightjars** coming from a field bordering the track. The birds were not immediately visible, so we drove on. We were about to turn back when suddenly Josele’s van came to an abrupt halt. There was a Red-necked Nightjar sitting on the track! Illuminated by the headlights the bird stayed put, allowing everyone to get incredible views through the telescope set to its minimum focusing distance. Now we truly had it “in our pockets”. Moment’s later a **Scop’s Owl** began calling. Now if that wasn’t the way to round off an excellent tour, what was?

Day 8: Morning drive to Madrid airport

**Total number of species recorded: 139**

Birds of the day:

Day 1: Black-winged Kite

Day 2: Great Bustard

Day 3: Collared Pratincole

Day 4: Black-bellied Sandgrouse

Day 5: Penduline Tit

Day 6: Eagle Owl,

Day 7: Spanish Imperial Eagle