

Spain

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Participants:

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Leader:

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Picture: Azure-winged Magpie

Day 1: Saw us depart Gatwick at just past 09.00 hours arriving at Faro, Portugal just before 13.00 hours local time. After picking up the vehicles during which time the group managed to see Fan-tailed Warbler and European Bee-eater, we set off east towards Spain. As everyone was keen to start birding as soon as possible however, we made our first stop at Castro Marim, just before the new bridge into Spain. The idea was to look for Greater Flamingo as due to the drought, they had dispersed from their normal areas. We were soon watching Black-winged Stilts, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper (in summer plumage), Little Stint, Redshank, Black-headed Gull, Little, Black and Whiskered Terns, Crested Lark, Yellow (Spanish) Wagtail and many Little Egrets at a large heronry. This stop provided several members of the group with a new bird, an excellent start. En-route to our hotel in Spain, we added a number of other species including 3 Lesser Grey Shrikes on migration, White Storks at their nests, 2 Black-crowned Night-herons and several more European Bee-eaters. After checking into our superb hotel and consuming a large buffet dinner with unlimited ice cream, we decided on an early night to make the best of the first full day.

Day 2: Dawned rather cold for those of us who braved a 07.30 seawatch from the beach which added Gannet and Lesser Black-backed Gull but no sign of the Arctic Skua or dozens of Black Terns seen the previous evening from our bedroom window. After a substantial buffet breakfast, we set off the short distance to Acebuche. Literally within seconds of arriving we had added Azure-winged Magpie to our lists and these birds were found to be common throughout the area. Black Kites were also very common with a few Red Kites and a Booted Eagle. Woodchat Shrike, Golden Oriole, Spotless Starling, Great Reed Warbler and Purple Heron all gave themselves up easily and with some good luck, we had a Little Bittern fly in front of the hide. Although the reserve is small, the birds were plentiful and everyone had seen at least one new one. In warm sunshine and beautiful surroundings, we strolled around for the next two hours gradually adding new birds such as Melodious, Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, Turtle Dove, Red-crested Pochard and Ferruginous Duck. With no sign of our main target species however, we drove north the 10 miles to El Rocio bridge. This proved somewhat timely as within less than a minute we had all seen a Purple Gallinule. There were also plenty of other good birds here with Red-rumped Swallow nesting under the bridge, Spoonbill, 3 Glossy Ibis, numerous Collared Pratincole and Gull-billed Tern. The waders were rather distant though so we worked our way round El Rocio, a real frontier type 'western' town to a rather out of place looking promenade which looks over the lagoon. There were plenty of close waders here

including Avocet, Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Little and 2 Temminck's Stints, Grey and a single Golden Plover all in summer plumage and Common Sandpiper. In the distance we also picked out a late wintering flock of 13 Greylag Geese. After filling our wader lists, we worked our way through the maze of streets to the old bridge at the start of the Cota del Rey track. The bridge is in a sorry state of repair with broken and missing planks whilst the alternative, a sandy ford was equally bad. Whilst assessing whether it was possible to get the minibus over, we watched a Hoopoe at its nest and a Little Owl at roost. Discretion proved better than valour and so we returned through El Rocio to spend the late afternoon at the La Rocina reserve. After all the excitement earlier in the day, it was going to prove hard to keep the momentum going, but we still managed to add Marsh Harrier, 3 more Booted Eagles, 4 more Purple Gallinule, Numerous Serin and stunning views of a Fan-tailed Warbler. Tired but happy, we retraced our steps to our hotel for another mountainous buffet dinner followed by even more ice cream! For those still with a little energy left, an evening foray was made to see nightjars. Locating the site easily, we surveyed the area to locate the best vantage point. This done, a brief play of a tape gave excellent results immediately when a male Red-necked Nightjar displayed only yards in front of us and perched on a telephone wire right above our heads in good light. What an end to the day.

Day 3: We drove down an incredibly bumpy track towards the northern Marismas. As well as the common birds previously seen, we were soon adding new species to our lists such as Calandra, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Wood Sandpiper and lots of other waders and marsh terns over flooded fields. In the ditches were more Purple Herons and another Purple Gallinule. Arriving at the new luxurious information centre at Lucio Cerrado Garrido, we bought some food and drink and settled down to scan the lake in comfort. There was very little new there however, just a male Pintail and a few Shoveler. We therefore set off on an even bumpier track back towards the Cota del Rey track and El Rocio. Almost immediately we stopped to look at some distant raptors to find that they were 10 Griffon and 2 Egyptian Vultures. Our joy was however, temporarily tempered by being constantly harassed by a park ranger who didn't want us to stop and look at birds! Despite this, we did get good views of a Spectacled Warbler before entering the Stone Pines and driving out of the park. The tracks were very sandy here but we safely negotiated them and soon arrived at the other side of the broken bridge. We had no alternative but to cross it this time but this was done successfully and we returned to our hotel through El Rocio again.

Day 4: Involved a long drive up to Seville and then south down towards Gibraltar. It didn't take us too long to reach our first destination, but by then a heat haze was starting to develop. Fortunately however, a sharp eyed member of the group soon spotted our quarry, a splendid male Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. A lot of the area had been severely degraded but after a careful scan, we were also able to add good views of Thekla Lark. As we drove on through the cultivated areas, Montagu's Harriers were quite common, although they were mainly males, probably because the females were already incubating. Pressing on towards the Laguna de Tarelo, we made several more stops culminating with excellent views of a European Roller perched on telephone wires. On arriving at the lake, we were pleased to see lots of birds on it. It didn't take us long to find the first White-headed Duck and our final came to 21! Also on the lake were a number of gulls including a Yellow-legged and 3 Slender-billed. Having still not seen Greater Flamingo, we drove round the back of the lake to look over the Bonanza salt pans. The distant salt pans were a sea of pink. As if to order, a few Flamingo's took off and landed much closer to us, followed by many more, giving us excellent views. With time still on our side we pressed on to Zahara and Atlantera. Raptors were a feature of the mountains here with Griffon Vultures and superb views of Short-toed Eagles. A brief view of a Crag Martin and plenty of Common Swifts but no sign of any White-rumped Swifts unfortunately. We did however, have good views of a male Blue Rock Thrush and brief views of a Rock Sparrow. By now it was rather late and after a long drive back, we only just arrived back in time for our evening meal!

Day 5: Was a more relaxed day and several members of the group decided to take either a half ,or the full day off. As we were still missing several relatively easy species, we decided to return to La Rocina. Our first goal was to see Savi's Warbler, having previously heard several. After a frustrating period our perseverance paid off with good views. We then decided to walk right round the reserve which has quite varied habitat. A frustratingly brief glimpse of a Rufous Bushchat was had by a couple of members of the group but despite searching, could not be relocated. As we walked through the Stone Pine woods however, we added several new birds including Short-toed Treecreeper and Tree Sparrow. Nightingales gave excellent views but we were unable to find Black-eared Wheatear. After a further search from the hides, we eventually saw the only Squacco Heron of the trip. In the afternoon after a brief return to our hotel, were visited Acebuche where we were rewarded with further excellent views of a number of species including Little Bittern, Ferruginous Duck, Short-toed Eagle and brief glimpses of two Great Spotted Cuckoo being mobbed by Magpies in the distance. In the evening, we revisited the nightjar site but unfortunately, we were not as lucky as the previous visit, having only brief views of a Red-necked Nightjar and hearing European Nightjar in the distance.

Day 6: Involved a very early start with packed breakfasts. By about 08:00 hours, we had reached the central plains and started looking for bustards. The scenery started to dramatically change with rocky outcrops rising out of the rolling grass plains, interspersed with vast fields of cereals. Taking the track out on to the Rio Salor plain, the ford across the river was deeper than when I last visited the area and I had to negotiate the narrow dilapidated bridge, this successfully done, we followed the tracks deeper in to the plains. We were soon rewarded with good views of a male Little Bustard and shortly afterwards, huge flocks of sparrows containing a good proportion of Spanish, some of which were males in fine plumage. Whilst watching the sparrows, we spotted a group of Great Bustards in a nearby pasture and of the 6 birds, one was a fine adult male in breeding plumage. It was a great moment with 3 new birds in as many minutes in superb scenery. Reluctantly moving on, we temporarily became disoriented in the town of Caceres. When we eventually found the road out, we were rewarded with a fine view over the town including the medieval church over which were flying about 50 Lesser Kestrel. Taking a minor road north, we found that a number of nestboxes had been placed on electricity pylons for Roller and we had good views of several birds. Shortly afterwards we spotted our first Alpine Swifts. The terrain looked excellent for wheatears but unfortunately we could find none. The wind was by now increasing and the sky looking rather threatening, so we drove on to a new site I had been given by Lars Larsson. We were not disappointed as we

immediately picked out the Spanish Imperial Eagle's nest on the electricity pylon about half a kilometre away. The male bird was perched on an adjacent pylon while the female appeared to be brooding a chick on the nest. Whilst admiring the spectacle from a safe distance, the male took off and circled round for several minutes before flying north presumably to hunt. We next looked for the Black-shouldered Kites but by now, the rain had started and we were not lucky. As the rain remitted, we decided to pay a late afternoon visit to Monfrague as we were unsure what the weather would be like the next day. The gorge was breath takingly spectacular and large numbers of birds of prey were flying around the cliffs and our heads! There were many Griffon Vultures together with smaller numbers of Black and Egyptian. Crag Martins were all around the rock faces and we found a very confiding female Blue Rock Thrush. As time was against us, we drove the very bumpy rock back to the beautiful town of Trujillo and checked in to our hotel. In the evening after our meal which included the traditional Spanish cold soup, we walked in to the old town centre. A brief attempt was made to locate a Scops Owl but we were quite tired after a long day and enthralled by the beauty of the place.

Day 7: Dawned a lot brighter so after breakfast we set off to explore some more of the plains, leaving two members of the group behind to explore the town. Lesser Kestrels were all over the place and not long after leaving the town, we were finally able to get good views of Great Spotted Cuckoo. In fact, in this area, they proved quite common Together with Great Grey Shrike. We then took a side track and when it proved no longer driveable, continued on foot. There were many Little Bustards holding territory giving us excellent views and even display flighting. At the brow of the hill we scanned the area, eventually finding another Great Bustard in the distance. Returning to the minibus, it was apparent why the area is so good for bustards with grasshoppers of sizes rising at every footstep. Hopefully the recent steps to reduce the spraying of pesticides will be in time to prevent the demise of these magnificent creatures. Just before arriving back at the vehicle, we were rewarded with good flight views of a Black-bellied Sandgrouse. With time ever passing, we set off back to Monfrague national park to search for new birds. Plenty of vultures again but small birds were hard to find. A Black Redstart was consolation for the lack of wheatears and warblers and we were again unable to find White-rumped Swift. Having driven to the furthest planned point, we started to return when finally a Black Stork was spotted in flight. Following it down, we could see a nest with a second bird with 2 or 3 young in it. An obliging male Blue Rock Thrush followed and on the return journey back to Trujillo, we found a male Cirl Bunting. After a brief look at the town and Pallid Swifts, we set off for the long journey home. Unfortunately, traffic conditions were not good and some of the driving standards atrocious. Late but safe however, we arrived back at Matalascanas for our last buffet dinner and ice cream!

Day 8: There was no time for birding, just packing, breakfast and a slow drive back through western Spain and an unscheduled visit around a fish market! A last stop before the bridge back in to Portugal, Faro Airport and our flight back to Gatwick. This was a most successful trip with 167 species seen. Several species were not seen because of the drought conditions including Crested Coot and Marbled Duck but many other difficult species were seen exceptionally well. My thanks to Barry Mathews for his meticulous list of species seen which follows this report, Dave Helliar for navigating and Peter Cuff for keeping up with me in his car. Finally, the main reason for this trip being so successful was that every one participated fully and for this I would like to express my appreciation,