

# Spain

## Coto Doñana and Extremadura

4 – 11 May 2003

### Participants:

**David Balfour**

**Graham and Phil Deacon**

**Wayne Geater**

**Barrie and Linda Hamill**

**John and Helen Nutbrown**



**Great Bustard** (Wayne Geater)

**Leader: Neil Gartshore**

**Day 1:** After a very early start in the UK for our flight to Faro (Portugal), we were watching our first southern European birds at Castro Marim, close to the Spanish border, by 11.00. This area of salt pans soon provided good views of European Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Collared Pratincole, Purple Heron and the Spanish race of Yellow Wagtail. The main attraction, however, was the number of species of waders present, 14 in all, including Ruff, Little Stint and Whimbrel. Continuing into Spain a detour took us to a part of the Marismas del Odiel near to Huelva, adding Greater Flamingo and another five wader species to our list. With time pressing we continued through Huelva, stopping briefly at a series of lakes immediately to the south of the town, and on to Matalascañas (our base for the next four nights). With time before dinner an evening sea watch from the hotel balcony produced single Arctic and Pomarine Skuas, Balearic and Cory's Shearwaters and a number of Northern Gannets. Despite the long day, and after a substantial buffet dinner, we headed out just before dusk to look for nightjars at the nearby Acebuche nature reserve. The breezy weather didn't help and no sightings were made but both European and Red-necked Nightjar were heard.

**Day 2:** Today was a little more relaxed after our long day yesterday. We were away by 09.00 heading back to the Acebuche nature reserve. The morning was spent visiting various hides on the reserve. The pick of the birds included Booted Eagle, Short-toed Treecreeper nesting in one of the hides, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Crested Tit, Purple Swamphen, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes and Red-crested Pochard, but there was a distinct lack of water birds. By lunchtime we moved on to the village of El Rocio to find a supermarket for get a snack for lunch. A watch over the Rocina Marsh produced close views of Whiskered Tern, Eurasian Spoonbill and, in the distance, Eurasian Griffon-vulture. After lunch we went off to see the state of the fabled bridge behind the village that leads out to the Coto del Rey area in preparation for a visit on Wednesday. Arriving at the bridge, a car was attempting to get up on to the concrete ford over the river without success. The bridge was completely impassable but we decided that with the height clearance of the van we would get over the ford okay. Retracing our steps we stopped for a short while to look over the area where a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagle was breeding, but nothing was seen. Heading south for a mile from El Rocio we turned in to La Rocina nature reserve for the rest of the afternoon. With similar species and habitat as this morning additions included Common Cuckoo, Cetti's and Melodious Warblers, Greylag Goose, Common Kingfisher and Black-crowned Night-heron. We returned to the hotel just after 17.00 to freshen up and for a short sea watch before dinner.

**Day 3:** Leaving at 07.30 we headed up to Seville and then down to the Marismas de Trebujena on the east bank of the Río Guadalquivir. On the way just before turning off the main road a stunning view of about 100 Greater Flamingos flying over was had. Stopping just before the river at an abandoned (?) attempt to build an information centre, we began to tick off the birds. Close views of a male and two female Montagu's Harrier and an over flying Short-toed Eagle provided the best sightings. A small pan adjacent to the building produced Little and Gull-billed Tern and a single Marbled Teal. Continuing on along the track, running

parallel to the river, regular stops found Red Kite, Pallid Swift and close views of Collared Pratincole on the ground. Following the road, we came to a larger pan where hundreds of swifts were hawking over the area giving us the opportunity to pick out the Pallids amongst the Commons. The pan itself produced 15 Pied Avocets, three Little Gulls (including two in full summer plumage), two Common Shelduck and a variety of other waders. Within 500m of leaving the pan we had stopped again as Eurasian Griffon-vultures caught our eye. After about half an hour over 60 had passed over our heads and Western Marsh-harrier, Common Buzzard and Booted Eagle were also picked up. As time was pressing we decided not to go to the salt pans at Bonanza but to head off towards Jerez de la Frontera and the Laguna de Medina. After eating a snack at the lake we set off in search of the specialities of this lake: Crested Coot and White-headed Duck. The shallow lagoon is 120ha with access limited to the south shore. The size of the lake and the heat haze made distant viewing a bit of a problem. It wasn't long before our first Crested Coot was seen (wearing a collar – apparently this is to stop the Spanish hunters from shooting them in mistake for Common Coot – a quarry species!). Another two birds were seen close to the southern shore a little further round. Little Bittern were seen on three occasions flying across the reeds, many Great Reed-warblers were seen climbing up the reed stems and the first White-headed Duck was well spotted by Graham on the far shore – not very good views because of the distance and heat haze but never-the-less unmistakable. A little further on one flew in close to the southern shore and was seen briefly before it disappeared into the reeds. We continued on to the end of the southern track, returning to the van by about 17.00 for the long drive back to Matalascañas.

**Day 4:** This was our final day in the Coto Doñana area. Out at 08.00, we headed to the Coto del Rey track and successfully negotiated the concrete ford. A combination of walking and driving along the track produced a mixture of birds in the stone pines on one side and open scrub on the other: Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Firecrest, Common Quail (heard but not seen), Eurasian Golden Oriole and Crested Tit amongst them. The condition of the track was bad and eventually we could get no further and chose to go back rather than to walk on further. This proved to be the best choice. Our aim was to reach the Jose Antonio Valverde visitor centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido. Turning off the main road just north of El Rocio to Villamanrique de la Condesa and then on to a raised gravel track we headed towards the centre (nearly 40 km away along these rough, but passable, tracks). Within a few hundred metres of leaving the tarred road we had good views of Spanish Sparrow, Tawny Pipit, Calandra and Short-toed Lark. The drive along the track was largely uneventful as the habitat to either side was 'improved'. Wayne caught sight of two Squacco Heron in a ditch in superb breeding condition. A few kilometres before the centre the track led to the wetlands where Purple Heron, Purple Swamphen, Red-crested Pochard, Whiskered Tern and a Swallow-tailed Butterfly showed well. On reaching the centre, herons and egrets could be seen all around – plenty more Purple Heron, Cattle Egret and Glossy Ibis busy nest building and a few Black-crowned Night-herons amongst them. A Northern Shoveler and four Marbled Teal provided the duck interest. Leaving the centre we headed back towards Coto del Rey eventually reaching a closed gate saying that written permission was needed to pass on the section back to where we were in the morning. Our plan had been to turn back anyway and retracing our steps past the centre, we stopped a little further on at Lucio del Lobo where a few Great Egrets were in evidence and two Slender-billed Gulls. Lesser Short-toed Lark was picked up between the centre and the lake. Continuing on past the lake we followed the maze of roads back towards Villamanrique and El Rocio. Before returning to the hotel we drove along the road to the Palacio de Acebron (past the La Rocina car park) to try to pick up some warblers without much success – a Great Spotted Woodpecker provided some consolation. We arrived back at the hotel by 19.45 for a late dinner.

**Day 5:** Leaving after an early breakfast at 05.30, and stopping briefly at Acebuche to listen again for the Red-necked Nightjars, we headed north to Cáceres in Extremadura, arriving there by mid-day. Our first stop just outside of the town produced Lesser Kestrel, Egyptian Vulture and Crag Martin. We headed north towards Torrejón el Rubio, turned off to Monroy then Sta Marta de Magasca and finally Trujillo (the area known as the Cáceres-Trujillo Steppes). Regular stops produced a variety of birds including European Roller, and more sightings of Spanish Sparrow, Montagu's Harrier and Calandra Lark. The highlight had to be two Black (Cinereous) Vultures sitting on a rock by the roadside not more than 50 or 60 metres away. As we stopped they spread their wings and took off giving us perfect views. The final area between Sta Marta de Magasca and the main Cáceres-Trujillo road provided us with the most excitement. The first raspberries were heard... Little Bustard. Despite appearing to be close they were extremely difficult to see. Our first stop produced no sightings but further on, stopping at a ploughed field (sandgrouse habitat), Barrie picked up a fine male Little Bustard on the skyline – not the best of views but unmistakable. Another stop to look at a Great Spotted Cuckoo by the roadside also produced a flock of 22 Black-bellied Sandgrouse over the adjacent ploughed field. We continued on into Trujillo, arriving at 17.30. With dinner not until 20.30 a number of the group took the opportunity to walk into this old walled town, getting more views of Lesser Kestrel and White Stork nesting around the town.

**Day 6:** For the keen few a pre-breakfast outing produced great results and began probably the best single day of the trip. We headed back to the Sta Marta de Magasca road to search for more bustards and sandgrouse. Approaching the stop we made yesterday where the sandgrouse were, a number of raspberries could be heard soon followed by sightings of Little Bustard (about 12 were seen or heard, many of them in flight). Stopping by a short grassy field three Eurasian Thick-knees (Stone Curlew) took off, and four Red Kite and five Montagu's Harrier were nearby. Two Little Bustard dropped in to the field giving breathtaking views soon to be outdone by a single male Great Bustard further back. With time passing we returned to the hotel for breakfast. The rest of the day was spent in the Monfragüe National Park to the north of Trujillo. Our first stop was made as we saw a number of birdwatchers by the side of the road to the south of Torrejón el Rubio (the road was being widened and resurfaced so was in a bad state!). The cause of the excitement were soon seen – two Spanish Imperial Eagle in flight. Our next main stop was at a viewpoint looking over cliffs known as Peña Halcón. The first attraction was the 100 or so Eurasian Griffon-vultures resting on the

cliff and wheeling around with younger birds in evidence. Egyptian Vulture, Blue Rock-thrush, Rock Bunting, a single Black Wheatear and good views of Black Stork were also had. From here we retraced our steps to gain access to the Castillo (a castle built on a ridge overlooking the Peña Halcón). Immediately after parking the van a pair of Black Redstart and a single Rock Petronia put in an appearance. Climbing up to the castle gave fantastic views over the Monfragüe ridge and bird's eye views of the vultures opposite. A possible distant Black Vulture was picked up as were two Alpine Swifts. Our next stop was in the village of Villarreal de San Carlos for a lunch break. It was getting very hot now and the shade was welcomed – a number of the party finding a cold beer dispensing machine! After lunch we continued on turning almost immediately right after the village on to the CC911. Almost immediately a number of Black-eared Wheatears were seen on an area recently cleared of scrub, up to six in all, and Woodlark sang overhead. The next stop was by the 'White Hut' where both Spanish Imperial Eagle and Black Vulture have nested in the past. A distant view of a large nest appeared to have an eagle on but foliage and the heat haze made viewing difficult. A pair of Subalpine Warblers was of some consolation. The parking area near to the Tietar Dam held more Eurasian Griffon-vultures on the opposite cliffs. A single Black Vulture sitting under a tree was picked up by David and a Black Kite could be seen on its nest in the trees below the cliffs. A little further on more cliffs there were more Eurasian Griffon-vultures plus many birdwatchers. We soon saw the reason for the excitement – two well-grown Eurasian Eagle-owl chicks. With time pressing we continued down the road to turn around and in an area of cork oak picked up Eurasian Jay and Eurasian Nuthatch, the only sightings of the trip. Passing the owl cliffs there was again excitement from the birdwatchers... a pair of Bonelli's Eagles displaying overhead, then two Golden Eagles followed by the cry of 'the adult Eagle Owl is back'... quite a frantic few minutes! Our final stop was to look for Black-winged Kite at a site heading east back towards Monroy. We followed the track for the stipulated 200m then one bird came into view on the wing, which soon joined a second bird on top of a tree. With the day's excitement over, we headed back to Trujillo, picking up Little Owl on the way, and a welcomed dinner, drink and rest.

**Day 7:** After yesterday's early-morning success we repeated the same drive. Unfortunately it was quieter but we did see/hear about six Little Bustards, two Eurasian Thick-knees, a single Great Spotted Cuckoo, eight Red Kites and nine Montagu's Harriers. After breakfast we left the hotel at 09.30 to eventually make our way south to Matalascañas for our final night. We started off heading north from Trujillo, then east and then south, eventually reaching the village of Conquista de la Sierra picking up a few birds on the way but nothing not already seen. From here we headed south to the Rio Salor Plain – reputedly with one of the highest concentrations of Great Bustard in the country. Stopping briefly at the Embalse de Sierra Brava (a large artificial dam) we added our only new trip bird of the day – Tufted Duck. Black-eared Wheatear and Gull-billed Tern were the best birds here. About 10 terns flew close by and probably another 400 could be seen at some distance on a small island (appeared to be breeding). A short picnic lunch by the Embalse de la Serena produced virtually no birds – most of these dams are too deep to support much – but most of the party were visited by various sized snakes as they ate. The next 30km was our last chance to catch up with the bustards. The area is vast open grasslands but looking for birds was a little like a needle in a haystack. Frequent stops in safe places and scanning as far as we could see paid off with Graham once again picking birds out at distance. A group of 18 Great Bustard could be seen. A little further on two more a little closer but still quite distant, then Wayne caught sight of two birds about 50m away as we were coming to the end of the road and good views were had by all. The road soon ran out and the long drive back to Matalascañas began, leaving the area at 15.30 and arriving at the hotel by 20.00. A final supper and drinks rounded off a superb trip.

**Day 8:** Our final day began with an early breakfast to allow us to drive the two hours to Faro airport for our check-in time of 08.20, arriving back in the UK by 13.00. The trip had been very productive with 174 species seen amongst the group. All group members came away with a number of new species on their bird list... even the leader saw five new species! On top of this many birds were seen very well and at close quarters. The best bird(s) of the trip? The group's opinions were divided but the pair of magnificent Spanish Imperial Eagles, the European Eagle-owls and the fine male Great Bustard will certainly be remembered for a long time. The best sound of the trip has to go to the raspberry blowing Little Bustards.

Thanks to all of the participants for making it such an enjoyable week and especially to Phil for the spot-on navigation around all of the twists and turns of the Spanish towns, motorways and the rural roads.