

Spain

Coto Doñana and Extremadura

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Participants:

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Eurasian Griffon-vulture

Day 1: Early flights from Heathrow and Manchester saw the party assemble at Faro (Portugal) just after 10.00am. Vehicles were collected and we headed off to Castro Marim, close to the Spanish border. A brief stop to pick up lunch at a petrol station produced Woodchat Shrike and Azure-winged Magpie. Castro Marim is a good place for waders and we weren't disappointed with 15 species noted including two Eurasian Thick-knees, 10+ Sanderling and up to 20 Collared Pratincoles. Other highlights here were a male and female Montagu's Harriers, a number of European Bee-eaters, a Hoopoe and around 200 Greater Flamingoes. Continuing on to our hotel in Matalascañas, we made a brief stop at Laguna de las Madres to the west of Mazagon, where four Purple Swamphens showed well and Cetti's, Reed and Great Reed Warblers and Zitting Cisticola were heard or seen. A short sea watch from the hotel before dinner was very productive with 50 Northern Gannets, a single Audouin's Gull, a single Great Skua and a good selection of terns (Common 100+, Sandwich 20, Little 12, Black 400+) passing by. After dinner, we headed off to Acebuche to look for nightjars and immediately ended up in a traffic jam. It took us about 45 minutes to travel the 3km in the bank holiday traffic and it was dark by the time we reached the nature reserve. A walk along the road produced the distinctive Red-necked Nightjar song and two birds seen in flight may have been this species (no European Nightjars heard).

Day 2: After breakfast we headed to Acebuche. On the way to the first hide a superb male Ortolan Bunting obliged with good views immediately followed by Booted Eagle, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Great Spotted Cuckoo. The hide produced views of Savi's Warbler, Purple Swamphen, Eurasian Spoonbill and Water Rail. After about half an hour a noisy coach party joined us, so decided to head off in the opposite direction. Southern Grey Shrike, Sardinian Warbler and Crested Tit were added on the walk through the scrub. Leaving Acebuche, we moved on to El Rocio to eat lunch. The wetland was full of birds (we later found out that the whole area was suffering from a major drought and this was the

biggest expanse of water left in the area). 100+ Greater Flamingoes, 50+ Gull-billed Terns, up to a 100 Eurasian Spoonbills, 100s of Common Coots, many waders, including 1000+ Curlew Sandpipers, 50+ Collared Pratincoles, 30 Ruffs and three Temminck's Stints, plus Whiskered Tern and Eurasian Griffon-vulture.

After lunch, we spent the afternoon at the Rocina Marsh where Hawfinch in the woodland, a pair of Western Marsh-harriers over the reeds and Squacco Heron provided the highlights. We returned to the hotel just after 5pm to freshen up and then did a short sea watch (less productive than yesterday) before dinner.

Day 3: Leaving at 7.30am we headed up to Seville and then down to the Marismas de Trebujena on the east bank of the Río Guadalquivir. A brief stop just out of Trebujena was rewarded with close views of three Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flying by. Dropping down to the river we headed south along the riverbank. The dryness of the surrounding area was very evident, with few birds around. The few swifts could be split into Common and Pallid, whilst Greater Short-toed Lark could be picked out from the majority of Crested Larks. The main body of water along the track held Purple Swamphen and Black-necked Grebe plus a few waders. Other highlights of the track included 150 Grey Plovers and good views of both Western Marsh-harrier and Montagu's Harrier. In the early afternoon we headed off to the Laguna de Medina. Here three Melodious Warblers and two Common Whitethroats gave good views, whilst on the lake Red-crested Pochard, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes were found amongst a large number of Common Coots. Despite looking at them all closely we couldn't pick out a Crested Coot amongst them. A new hide towards the end of the track provides welcome shade out of the sun... well it would have if it had been open! Finally, on the way back to the vehicles, a single female White-headed Duck put in an appearance close to the shore. We returned to the vehicles by about 5pm for the long drive back to Matalascañas.

Day 4: We headed off after breakfast to the Jose Antonio Valverde visitor centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido to the north of the Park. A stop en route produced good views of Wood Lark and Hoopoe. Once on to the raised dirt tracks and heading towards the centre Spanish Sparrow and Calandra Lark were soon picked up. Further along the track Greater (20) and Lesser Short-toed Lark (8), Sardinian Warbler (12) and single Whinchat and Spectacled Warbler were seen. Driving along, it was obvious how bad the drought was. There was virtually no water in any of the ditches and certainly no flooding out onto the fields. In one area a number of irrigated fields held a large number of waders, egrets (including Great White) and terns. At the centre, the water levels were reasonable high in the lake but a lot of the birds were not breeding. Picks of the bunch were 70 Eurasian Spoonbills, 250 Greater Flamingoes, over 120 Grey Herons, 30 Pied Avocets, 15 Purple Herons, 10 Red-crested Pochards and four Black-crowned Night-herons. On the way back to the main road from the centre birds were hard to find, but good views were had of Purple Swamphen in the splashes of water that remained in the ditches.

Day 5: We left after an early breakfast at 5.30am, and stopped briefly at La Roscina to listen for the Red-necked nightjar – good views of a bird sitting on the road were had by all. Heading north to Cáceres in Extremadura, we arrived there by late morning. Leaving Cáceres we headed north towards Torrejón el Rubio. Pulling off the road just before the bridge over the Rio Almonte, a lunch stop provided close views of Alpine Swift and Eurasian Crag-martin under the bridge, and two male/one female Black Wheatears. We also saw two Black Storks and a number of Eurasian Griffon-vultures in the same area. The next stop on the Torrejón el Rubio road was to look for Black-winged Kite at a known site but with no luck. Nesting Common Ravens providing the best interest. We carried on driving around the roads in a roundabout way to Trujillo – Montagu's Harrier, Red Kite and Eurasian Thick-knee were the pick of the birds. With dinner not until 20.30pm, the leaders took the opportunity to walk into this old walled town whilst the others freshened up and found the bar. Up to 16 Lesser Kestrels were flying around the town centre and a flock of 150 European Serins were seen by the castle.

Day 6: A pre-breakfast outing along the Sta Marta de Magasca road produced both Little and Great Bustards (13 of each) and Pin-tailed (2) and Black-bellied Sandgrouse (4). From information received from another birdwatcher, we headed off after breakfast on the road to the east of Belén in search of a long-staying Northern Bald Ibis. Eventually, it was found perched in a tree by a small pond with nesting White Storks. Further along the road stops produced close views of Eurasian Griffon-vultures and Black and Egyptian Vultures. With time passing, we continued on to the Monfragüe National Park. A lunch stop at the Castillo was accompanied by a pair of Rock Sparrows prospecting the cave at the bottom of the Castillo rocks, a pair of Blue Rock-thrushes and Rock Bunting. Black Redstarts was also seen around the Castillo. Our next stop was at the viewpoint looking over the Peña Halcón with plenty of Eurasian Griffon-vultures flying around. Stops in the area of the village of Villarreal de San Carlos produced a number of Black-eared Wheatears and Subalpine and Dartford Warblers. Next stop was the 'eagle owl' rocks. This year a Spanish Eagle had built a nest to the right of the rocks and the bird could be clearly seen on the nest whilst another bird was watched flying around high in the sky. [Later we heard that the nest had been robbed!]. As it was still a little early to see the owls, we stopped a few miles down the road for a drink at a bar and watched a Black Stork fly by. After a break, we went back towards Villarreal de San Carlos and took the road north to the edge of the park. Following the instructions, we had been given for Bonelli's Eagle we approached the edge of the park, found the lay-by, the National Park sign, looked up and saw two Bonelli's Eagles, whilst Eurasian Jay in the valley below added to our days' tally. We headed back to the 'owl' cliffs and waited with many other bird watchers. It was past 8pm when a few people, including two of the group, saw a bird briefly. Then nothing! A few members of the group were getting twitchy, a few others hungry as it was approaching 9pm. The decision was made to leave when others that were leaving saw the owl in full view. It had probably been there all the time but was unsighted from where we were all standing and was only seen when people were walking down the road to their cars to leave. There were then a frantic few minutes whilst everyone repositioned themselves to get a good view. Happy at last we headed back to the hotel for a late dinner.

Day 7: Another pre-breakfast visit along the Sta Marta de Magasca road. Both Little and Great Bustards were seen again but in smaller numbers than yesterday. A European Scops-owl calling briefly was of note. After breakfast, we headed towards Cáceres in search of European Roller. About 30km from Trujillo a minor road to the north cut back to Sta Marta de Magasca. On this road we could see that many of the telegraph poles had nest boxes on and it wasn't long before we saw the first European Rollers. We carried on, stopping for Lesser Kestrel, Eurasian Griffon-vulture and Black Vultures en route before stopping at the bridge over the Rio Tamuja where we could see a number of snakes and frogs in the water below. By late morning, we headed back to Trujillo for lunch before continuing south back to Matalascañas for our final night.

Day 8: With most of the day available before our evening flights back to the UK, we set off to the Villamanrique area to find the Black-shouldered Kite site. Once onto the right track, a Melodious Warbler showed itself well. A birdwatcher coming in the opposite direction confirmed that we were heading the right way but that the kite was a few miles along the track. Following his directions, the bird was seen almost immediately when we got to the right spot and stayed at the top of a small tree giving excellent views. After enjoying superb views of the kite, it was back to La Roscina for lunch and a final hours birding before heading back to Faro airport. The final new bird for the trip, bringing the total to 176 for the tour was a single female Pied Flycatcher in the woods.