

Spain

Coto Doñana and Extremadura

Participants:

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Spanish Eagle

Leader: Neil Gartshore

Day 1: With the Gatwick flight on time, the group gathered at Faro at 11.00 and stepped out of the terminal into an oven. The area was in the middle of a heat wave with temperatures in the high 30 °Cs. After picking up the minibus and fuel we set off for Spain. Reaching junction 99 on the main Portugal–Spain highway we turned off and headed towards the Odiel Marshes and our first birding stop. Driving along this long road across the marshes we stopped at various points to scan for birds. Despite the heat, birds were added thick and fast – particularly waders. The numbers of waders were not huge but we soon added 12 species to the list including Kentish Plover, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and Common Redshank – with many individuals in transition to or in full summer plumage. The pick of the other water birds were Red-crested and Common Pochard, Little Tern, Eurasian Spoonbill and Common Shelduck. A few sightings of Western Marsh-harrier, a single Black Kite, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes and Zitting Cisticola were also added to the day’s list. After a couple of hours out on the marsh we turned around and set off for Matalascañas, checking in to the Tierra Mar at around 17.00.

Day 2: A seawatch at first light (07.00) was totally unrewarding as the sea was flat calm and the skies were clear – only a few Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were seen passing by. After breakfast it was off to the nearby El Acebuche reserve for the morning. On the way in to the reserve parking area Southern Grey Shrike, Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eater and Dartford Warbler were seen from the minibus. Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Spotless Starling and Azure-winged Magpie were obvious as we walked to the first hide, a Eurasian Golden Oriole could be heard hidden high in a tree by the hide and a Common Nightingale showed well. From the hide, Purple Swamphen, Great Reed-warbler, Yellow (Spanish) Wagtail and Purple Heron were soon seen but, despite a thorough scan, Savi’s Warbler could only be heard. More Common Nightingales flitted across in front of the hide and both male and female Eurasian Golden Orioles put in an appearance on a couple of occasions giving excellent views. The rest of the morning was spent

walking around the pine woods trying to keep in the shade as the temperature soared. Just before lunch we drove into El Rocio stopping first by the main road to look over the marsh before parking in the town. The marsh still held plenty of water and a lot of birds – hundreds of Eurasian Coots, 600 Greater Flamingo, 150 Black-tailed Godwits, 60 Collared Pratincoles, 30 Curlew Sandpipers and smaller numbers of Glossy Ibises, Pied Avocets, Little Ringed Plovers and Greylag Geese. After a lunch stop in town we headed to the Palacio de Acebron to walk around the lake (taking advantage of the shade). Common Cuckoo, Cetti's Warbler, Blackcap and Eurasian Blue Tit were added to the list and a Short-toed Treecreeper was heard. The remainder of the day was spent on the La Rocina nature trail, stopping at the first hide and then walking around part of the boardwalk trail. From the hide we saw Purple Heron, a nicely-marked female Western Marsh-harrier and good views of Melodious Warblers were the pick of the birds. On the walk, a cluster of herons and egrets on the edge of the marsh held Black-crowned Night-heron (3), Squacco Heron (4), Little Egret, Eurasian Spoonbill, Purple and Grey Herons and Eurasian Reed-warblers showed well in the same spot. The final bird of the walk was a Western Olivaceous Warbler, giving brief views and a snatch of song. We arrived back at the hotel by 18.00 for a 19.30 dinner. The temperature gauge on the car had reached 39.5°C today!

Day 3: After an early breakfast (and an Osprey passing offshore at first light) we set off to the east side of the Río Guadalquivir, heading first for the Laguna de Medina near Jerez. From the viewpoint overlooking the lake there was an obvious movement of birds of prey overhead. Eventually around 60 European Honey-buzzards drifted through plus a couple of Eurasian Hobbies, Black Kites and four Eurasian Griffons. The lake itself was very quiet with 30 Great Crested Grebes the most numerous species. There were hardly any coots visible on the lake at all – those seen were Eurasian (no Crested). A pair of our other target birds, White-headed Duck, was seen quite close to shore. Other birds of interest included Black-necked Grebe (2), Western Marsh-harrier (2), Common Sandpiper (12) and, in the surrounding scrub, Sardinian Warbler. After lunch at the lake we headed to the Guadalquivir, stopping first at the Bonanza saltpans. Many of the pans were quiet but as we drove further in along the track birds were more obvious. 300 Curlew Sandpipers were the most numerous with smaller numbers of Pied Avocets, Grey Plovers and Dunlins. Single Little Stint and Spotted Redshank were new for the list. From the saltpans we stopped briefly at the Laguna de Tarelo just inside the Algaída Pine Woods. The most surprising bird here was a male Zebra Finch! On the lake the distant heronry still held Little and Cattle Egrets, Squacco Heron and Black-crowned Night-heron. A party of eight and three other Black-necked Grebes included one individual that was almost pure albino. The drive along the river towards Trebujena was rather disappointing with very few birds around – a female Northern Shoveler and a single Red Kite were the only birds of note. The day was quite breezy, which kept the temperatures down to the low 30°Cs – but the car's gauge did reach 37°C as we drove around Seville. A Little Owl was seen on wires just before reaching El Rocio on the way back. Before going down to dinner a sea watch from the room balcony found a few juvenile Northern Gannets passing south and Neil G was lucky to pick up a single 2nd-summer Audouin's Gull dipping into the water quite close to shore.

Day 4: Out at 6.00 to go searching for nightjars before first light at La Rocina. After years of the gate being open at this time in the morning it was locked! For plan B we headed off to the old Coto del Rey road at the back of El Rocio and walked a short way along the road as it got lighter. No nightjars but plenty of early bird song including Stonechat, Sardinian Warbler and lots of Common Nightingales whilst two Black-crowned Night-herons flew over. We stopped for a quick look over the marsh before leaving town – there were still a lot of birds about including flights of Cattle Egrets leaving their roost on the marsh, Greater Flamingos and Eurasian Spoonbills. After breakfast we left at 09.00 for the Jose Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido along the northern edge of the park. A stop in the pine wood on the way added Woodlark to the list and there were good views of European Turtle-dove along the roadside. We continued along the tarred road to the start of the 28km unmade track to the Centre. The track had been significantly improved since 2011 but the drive still took over two hours as we stopped frequently when we came across any birds of interest. The area was very dry but, as we got closer to the Centre, farmers were preparing fields for rice planting and some of the fields were flooded. At one particularly good spot we picked up Whiskered

Tern (20), Gull-billed Tern (30), Common Greenshank, Common Redshank and a few other waders. Along the route occasional Marsh and Montagu's Harriers passed by and just before the Centre a Great Egret flew out of a ditch. We stopped at the Centre for lunch. The heronry was deserted – breeding must have finished but there were a few birds in the flooded field behind the lake, mainly Glossy Ibises. After lunch at the Centre we drove down the Coto del Rey road as far as the locked gate. Again the surrounding land was very dry but we had excellent views of both Greater Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks in the same view for comparison. Returning to the Centre we headed off in the opposite direction where the bird of the day showed itself very well just along the track (in flight and on the wires)... a European Roller. We arrived back at the hotel by 17.30 (a casual seawatch picked up Northern Gannet, Sandwich Tern and a Bonxie). After dinner some of the group went out to look for Red-legged Partridges seen briefly on the edge of town – no luck with them but we did see two female Red Deer. We decided to drive along the fence line to the car park at the end of the town and then walked over the boardwalk through the sand dunes towards the sea. A number of Sardinian Warblers could be heard but as it was getting dark Red-necked Nightjars began their distinctive calls. Eventually we had excellent close views of a bird in flight and perched on a tree branch silhouetted against the sky. Two, possibly three, males were heard.

Day 5: After an early breakfast we were off by 08.15 heading north to Extremadura. The drive up was uneventful, with a couple of stops for refreshments and loos. We finally stopped for lunch at 12.30 by a minor road just north of Cáceres. The next five hours were spent driving around a circuit on the Cáceres-Trujillo plains and back to our accommodation at the Finca Santa Marta in San Clemente, just south of Trujillo. A stop by the large road bridge over the Rio Almonte failed to pick up Black Wheatear but we did have good views of Blue Rock-thrush, obviously nesting somewhere as it was coming and going with food in its beak. Amongst the House Martins and Eurasian Crag-martins nesting on the bridge were a few pairs of Alpine Swifts – apart from good views in flight a couple of birds could be seen sitting on nests in the bridge (their tails sticking out). Driving around the general area we picked up Cinereous Vulture, Lesser Kestrel, Common Cuckoo, Calandra Lark and Southern Grey Shrike. Our final stop before making our way to the finca was on the Sta Marta de Magasca to Trujillo road to look for bustards and sandgrouse. Little Bustard and the sandgrouse proved elusive, not surprising as the grass was quite high, but a careful scan over the grassland soon found nine Great Bustards. After watching them for a while it was on to the finca, arriving there just after 17.30. With dinner not until 20.00 the group had an opportunity to relax for a while. A European Scops-owl was heard briefly calling in the distance after dark.

Day 6: For those keen enough we had a pre-breakfast (6.30–9.00) drive out, to the Sta Marta de Magasca to Trujillo road to look for bustards again. The morning was much cooler (and overcast) and as we reached our first stop steady rain began to fall. Sheltering under the raised boot of the minibus we managed to pick up five Little Bustards on a grassy slope and heard Common Quail at close quarters. After having our fill of Little Bustards we drove further along the road and turned off along a dirt track to try to find the party of Great Bustards seen yesterday. Despite the rain, two birds were picked up at quite close quarters and there were plenty of Calandra Larks about. On leaving the dirt road and heading back towards Trujillo an even closer Great Bustard was by the roadside and four Montagu's Harriers sailed over the grassland. The plan for the rest of the day was to spend our time in Monfragüe National Park to the north of Trujillo. Leaving at 10.00 we arrived at our first stop, at the Castillo, just as it began to spit with rain again. By the time we had walked to the top of the Castillo the heavens opened as we all huddled under the small shelter over the entrance to the church. Eventually the rain eased off and the Eurasian Griffons took to the air again. Other birds of interest included two Peregrine Falcons, a Blue Rock-thrush and a Rock Bunting. Still trying to dry off we walked back down to the minibus and drove around to the viewpoint overlooking the Peña Halcón cliffs. From here we had closer views of the Eurasian Griffons plus Black Stork, Black Redstart and, with a little patience, a Black Wheatear was picked up on the scree slopes to the right of the rock. We then carried on to the village of Villarreal de San Carlos for a lunch and loo break. A Little Ringed Plover here was a bit of a surprise – on a small area of grass in the village. After lunch we continued along the road through the park heading to our final destination of the Portilla del Tietar, stopping occasionally along the way. Our first

stop looked over an area of scrubland (being restored to its native vegetation) to look for Black-eared Wheatear (catching a brief view of a single bird). Then it was on to a very scenic viewpoint looking over the Monfragüe Ridge and the Rio Tietar below. A Cinereous Vulture flew right over our heads here and someone pointed out to us a nest of this species in the distant woodland – obvious once you knew where it was. Our last stop at the Portilla del Tietar provided fantastic views of Spanish Eagle. The birds were nesting in a tree on the opposite side of the water and young birds could be glimpsed on the nest through the canopy. One adult bird was sitting on a dead branch in full view and at times both birds were up in the air – what a privilege! Despite a thorough scan of the opposite rocks and slopes we couldn't find the Eurasian Eagle-owl youngsters that had recently fledged but did have good views of Subalpine Warbler around the viewing area. As time was getting on we retraced our route and headed out of the park stopping again by the scrubland where we picked up better views of the Black-eared Wheatear. We made another stop at the Peña Halcón viewpoint but didn't add anything new except for a single Great Cormorant flying through and there were now plenty of Eurasian Griffons circling overhead. We finally left the park at 18.00 for the hour's drive back to the finca for dinner at 20.00.

Day 7: The day started with another optional 6.30–9.00 start with a visit to the nearby Belen Plain before breakfast. This is one of the best sites for bustards in the area and we weren't disappointed with a group of 23 plus another four Greats and around 12 Littles – many of the latter heard giving their distinctive 'raspberry' call. Other birds on the drive included two Little Owls and a number of Lesser Kestrels. A Cirl Bunting was seen by David at the finca as he opted out of the early morning start. Leaving the finca by 10.00 we dropped off David and Angela in Trujillo while the rest of the group spent the morning driving a circuit from Trujillo, up to Sta Marta de Magasca and back down to the Cáceres-Trujillo road. An early stop picked up Mistle Thrush, large numbers of Spanish Sparrows and a Booted Eagle over then, a little further on, two distant Little Bustards. We tried the dirt track again where we had the Great Bustards previously. A Cinereous Vulture flew over and another bird, sitting on a rock, caused some confusion until we realised as it took off that it was actually an immature Golden Eagle – great views as it landed again before taking off and disappeared from sight – totally unexpected! Continuing on towards Sta Marta de Magasca we flushed a Great Spotted Cuckoo by the roadside, which fortunately landed nearby and we were able to get good views of it (another bird was then seen with it a little further along the road). On the final part of the drive, after the village and just before the Cáceres-Trujillo road, we were on the lookout for European Rollers. Many of the pylons have nest boxes attached to them here to encourage the birds to breed. We weren't disappointed as we picked up about 10 birds on the wires and/or on the ground. Now it was back to Trujillo to pick up the others and to have lunch before heading south at 15.30. The journey was quite difficult as we hit frequent patches of torrential rain along the way, eventually arriving back in Matalascañas at just after 19.30. After dinner we filled in our final bird log – 154 species had been recorded amongst the group. Some birds were noticeable by their absence but we had seen many unforgettable sights during the week with pride of place probably going to the Spanish Eagles.

Day 8: All that remained now was to get back to Faro for our 11.30am flight home. The journey provided a few birds along the way including European Bee-eaters, Woodchat Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie. An Osprey flying over the industrial area of Huelva was only the second sighting of the trip and once in Portugal a Eurasian Jay flew over the road... the 155th and final new bird of the trip. There were no delays on the flight back to Gatwick where we arrived slightly ahead of time at 14.00 where the trip ended.

NEIL GARTSHORE