

Spain

Coto Doñana and Extremadura

9–16 May 2013

Participants

Keith Bamford
Richard Cuthbertson
David Daniels
Raymond Harrison
John Hunt
Ingrid and Michael Lake



Nesting Black-winged Stilt

Leader Neil Gartshore

Spain had seen one of its wettest winters on record and this was obvious as there was plenty of water still about in the south and north. Recent rain had resulted in a profusion of wild flowers, especially on the road verges and in the Dehesa of Extremadura. On the bird front some birds were conspicuous by their absence – in the south we only saw one Purple Swamphen (a juvenile at that), numbers of larks were fairly thin on the ground and in the north we didn't see a single Montagu's Harrier. Nevertheless, 155 species were recorded amongst the group during the week.

Day 1 Five of the party met up at London Luton for the 06.40 flight to Faro, arriving on time just after 09.30. Michael and Ingrid were already in Faro and Richard arrived on a 10.30 flight as the van was being sorted out. All timings fell into place and we were away from the airport by 11.00. The journey into Spain didn't take long with a few birds en route, including White Stork, Red-rumped Swallow and Azure-winged Magpie starting off the trip list. Just before Huelva we turned off at the Odiel Marshes with a first stop by the small lagoon near to the main salt extraction depot. The water level was high and there were few birds present. Two Little Bitterns, in flight and on the ground, were undoubtedly the best birds here, and a single Great Black-backed Gull on the adjacent saltpan was unusual this late in the spring. A slow drive down the marsh, with stops when anything of interest was seen, added birds thick and fast – especially waders including Kentish Plover, Black-bellied Plover, 20 Bar-tailed Godwits, 20 Whimbrels and a single Collared Pratincole. Other birds of interest included Common Shelduck, Western Marsh-harrier, Black Kite, Raven, Woodchat Shrike and a pair of Ospreys nesting on the top of a platform out in the marsh. After crossing the main part of the marsh we turned around and traced our steps back up to the main road and continued on to Matalascañas arriving at the Hotel Flamero by 17.00. After a rest and an early dinner at 19.00 we drove to the end of the town to the boardwalk across the sand dunes on the edge of the national park. There were a good number of European Serins about, vocal Sardinian Warblers and brief views of European Bee-eater. With dusk approaching at 21.45 a Red-necked Nightjar was heard briefly before it was seen flying out of a nearby tree, joined by a second bird. With the daylight gone it was back to the hotel just after 22.00.

Day 2 Breakfast and out by 09.00 although David and Ray had ventured out earlier finding a Eurasian Golden Oriole by the hotel and Common Scoter passing on the sea. A quick look over the sea before leaving picked up more Northern Gannet and Common Scoter, a single Great Skua and 21 Sanderlings on the beach. First stop today was the El Acebuche reserve. On the way in to the car park Southern Grey Shrike, European Bee-eater and Dartford Warbler were picked up and Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Spotless Starling and Azure-winged Magpie were about the car park. The first hide was quite devoid of waterbirds but two Savi's Warblers could be heard but try as we might we couldn't locate them. There were plenty of European Serins, vocal Common Nightingales – giving brief views as they flitted about, and frequent views of a male Eurasian Golden Oriole out in the open were rewards for the lack of water birds. Leaving the first hide we continue around the pine woods trail stopping in the other hides as we went – still a lack of waterbirds but we did add Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Booted Eagle and two very close Thekla Larks to the day's list. For no particular reason we walked up to the 'Coot' hide, one we usually miss out – there is no longer any water here – but the decision paid off as Ray picked up a 'thrush'. With closer views we soon realised that we were looking at a female Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, which eventually gave excellent views. Returning to the first hide we continued on to the other hides in the opposite direction picking up close views of a juvenile Purple Swamphen, Great Reed-warbler, a single Crested Grebe and, finally, views of singing Savi's Warbler. We stopped for a short lunch break at the centre's café. Next on to El Rocio – the new bypass has finally been completed and access on to the road to view the town's marsh was via a detour to the north of the town, coming in from that direction (hopefully they will create a south access to the town in due course). El Rocio's annual festival was due the following weekend and preparations were being made, including blocking off the viewing screens overlooking the marsh – we had to make do with looking from the adjacent sandy track. The water level was high and there was a total lack of any waders, except for Black-winged Stilt, and ducks were limited to just two Red-crested Pochards, about 20 Common Pochards and a few Mallards. There were also about 25 Whiskered Terns flying about plus Greater Flamingo and Eurasian Spoonbill. After a detour back round the bypass we reached the entrance (only 100m away!) to our next two stops, heading first to the Palacio de Acebron to walk around the lake. Common Cuckoo (heard), Eurasian Hoopoe, Eurasian Blue Tit and Melodious Warbler were added to the list. We spent the remainder of the afternoon on the La Rocina nature trail, stopping at the first hide and then walking around part of the boardwalk trail. Once again there were few waterbirds about, the best being Red-crested Pochard (nine). A single Spotted Flycatcher was added to the trip list. We arrived back at the hotel by 17.30 for a break before dinner.

Day 3 Today we headed off to the east side of the Río Guadalquivir, leaving by 07.45. As it was, Saturday traffic around Seville was quite light and we made good time in getting to our first stop at the Laguna de Medina near Jerez. Looking over the lake from the viewpoint we were disappointed to see the lake almost devoid of birds with about 20 Great Crested Grebes the most numerous species and the occasional Common Pochard and Eurasian Coot. We walked along the southern shore as far as the hide and were rewarded with close views of Melodious and Great Reed-warblers, Zitting Cisticola and, from the hide, a brief view of a Little Bittern in flight. A flight of 12 Eurasian Griffons passed overhead as we had lunch before moving on. Next we moved on to the Rio Guadalquivir, stopping first at the Bonanza saltpans. The pans had a good number and selection of waders, with 13 species noted here. A 14th species was then picked out, totally unexpected – a Red-necked Phalarope swimming amongst Pied Avocets and Black-winged Stilts... then a second bird was seen on the same saltpan. There were also a good number of Slender-billed Gulls present, about 150 of them. From the saltpans we stopped briefly at the Laguna de Tarelo just inside the Algaida Pine Woods. On the lake the distant heronry still held breeding Cattle and Little Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbill and Black-crowned Night-heron, all with young at various stages of growth. A scan over the water soon picked up a female White-headed Duck out in the open, and then a male which proved more elusive disappearing behind an island after giving some brief views. The final stretch of the journey continued along the river road towards Trebujena. Once again the amount of water was obvious as a lot of the land to the right of the raised road was still holding water (usually dry by now) with plenty of Greater Flamingos, Whiskered Terns and Black-winged Stilts making the most of the floods. A single Marbled Teal and a single Gull-billed Tern were the pick of the birds on this stretch. Just before reaching the town a Greater Short-toed Lark on the road added our final new bird of the day then it was back to the hotel, arriving by 19.30.

Day 4 We planned today to go to the Jose Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido along the northern edge of the park. We were stopped by police on the edge of Matalascañas (road blocked off) but fortunately we were allowed to go by as we were only going to El Rocio (the road beyond was closed). The route out to the centre was still accessible after the bypass changes to the road system and surprisingly the centre is now signposted from the turning off the road to the north of El Rocio (no more getting lost trying to find the entrance road!). A brief stop in the pine wood on the way added Wood Lark to the trip list (singing from power lines) and Eurasian Turtle-dove, Dartford Warbler, Crested Tit and Common Cuckoo were seen or heard. We continued along the now well-signposted tarred road to the start of the 28km unmade track to the visitor centre. We headed to the centre stopping along the way if anything of interest was seen. The farmland was very dry with a lot of the fields already cropped. The best sighting was of about 150 Sand Martins sitting on wires/flying around one of the main drains. Once we reached the edge of the park, close to the centre, the area was flooded with a lot of bird activity with good numbers of Whiskered Terns and Purple Herons, nesting Great Crested Grebes and plenty of Glossy Ibises flying around. We continued on to the centre to have a lunch break only to find it closed (it was Sunday). We retraced our steps 100m and pulled up by the road junction parking the van to provide some shade. A small lagoon here held a pair of White-headed Ducks – the female showing herself well, the male being more elusive – and we also had good views of a Little Bittern. After a lunch break we drove down the Coto del Rey road as far as the locked gate. Again the surrounding land was fairly quiet with Squacco Heron, Black-necked Grebes (about 20 birds, including young), Northern Lapwing, Common Greenshank and Northern Shoveler were added to the trip list. Other birds of interest included a flock of around 200 Greater Ringed Plovers, 20 Collared Pratincoles and about 50 Eurasian Griffons. Retracing our steps we headed off in the opposite direction, past the centre, to leave the park area. This section was very quiet, with only a single Northern Wheatear being of note. On the way back, just before El Rocio, we hit a lot of traffic with people parking on the road sides and walking into town (part of the festival celebrations) – fortunately we got through the blockage fairly quickly and headed south on the bypass. Driving by La Rocina the gate was locked as was the El Acebuche gate (Sunday closing?) so our intention of looking at a wetland was scuppered and we returned to the hotel by 17.30.

Day 5 After an early breakfast we were away by 07.45 heading north to Extremadura arriving at the motorway turn off just north of Cáceres. The next few 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. First we made a brief stop at the first bridge over the Rio Almonte picked up Eurasian Crag-martin and White and Grey Wagtails before stopping for lunch by the main road bridge a little further on. Water levels in the dam were very high with the old bridge completely covered (usually well out of the water). Six Alpine Swift flying around the bridge and a pair of Blue Rock-thrushes were new additions to the trip list. After a break, we carried on over the plains, turning off the road to Monroy and then on to Santa Marta de Magasca. Birds proved to be few and far between and the tall grass made viewing difficult – two Common Kingfishers on another river crossing were the only birds of note. Eventually we reached the open grassland to the south of Santa Marta de Magasca and searched (without any luck) for bustards and sandgrouse. By 17.00 we headed into Trujillo, stopping for a short time to look at the Lesser Kestrels flying over the town before picking up fuel and heading to Santa Marta, arriving just after 17.30. The grounds of this delightful old Finca provided good views of a pair of Eurasian Hoopoes a singing Eurasian Golden Oriole and Azure-winged Magpies abounded and Neil caught sight of two Hawfinches flying by. Finally, after dusk, a European Scops-owl was heard calling close by.

Day 6 The day started with a pre-breakfast drive out to the Belen Plain (with the European Scops-owl calling on the farm as we left). Missing the first turn off the motorway we left at junction 240, passing through Torrecillas de la Tiesa, before turning right down on the Belen road. This tarred road is now in a bad state of repair, especially along the northern section and birds were thin on the ground – with a Little Owl the best bird of note. Nearing Belen the open grassland proved the best spot. A scan picked up a Great Bustard, with four birds (all males) eventually found on the ground and in flight. The first Little Bustards were seen briefly in flight and then heard before individuals picked up on the ground – in all there were eight in the area. A fly-by Cinereous Vulture and a Common Raven were the best of the rest. We were back by 09.00 for breakfast. By 09.45 we were out again heading to the Monfragüe National Park to the north of Trujillo – first stop, the Castillo. We drove up to the parking area just below the cave – a singing Rock Petronia was soon located and a Blue Rock-thrush obliged by

sitting on a wire. On the walk up a single Red-billed Chough attracted our attention as it flew by calling. Quite a bit of improvement work has been carried out since last year's visit – a new path up the last section of the climb up is far more attractive than going up the steps and on the top a new viewing platform is far safer than standing on the edge of the wall. As ever the main attraction here is the Eurasian Griffons flying by at eye level. Moving on the next stop was by the viewpoint overlooking the Peña Halcón cliffs. From here we had closer views of the Eurasian Griffons plus Black Stork, Egyptian Vulture, Black Redstart and Rock Bunting. With lunchtime approaching we carried on to the village of Villarreal de San Carlos for a break. After lunch we continued along the road through the park heading to the Portilla del Tietar, stopping occasionally along the way. Our first stop overlooked over an area of scrubland where there are usually Black-eared Wheatears – one bird was seen briefly in flight. Then it was on to the viewpoint looking over the Monfragüe Ridge and the Rio Tietar below where we saw three close Egyptian Vultures overhead and a singing Subalpine Warbler in the scrub. Finally our last stop was at the Portilla del Tietar where immediately a Rock Bunting was seen on top of the viewing hut and by its calls was nesting nearby. Unfortunately this year the Spanish Eagles didn't appear to be breeding on the opposite bank so we were left with scanning the sky for them, no sign either of any Eurasian Eagle-owls. After a while Neil picked up a distant Spanish Eagle in the air and managed to get a scope on it and called everyone else to come and have a look. In his haste to get over, one of the group slipped on the gravel and grazed his knees quite badly... but did manage to see the eagle when he got up! As the injury required attention, we decided to call it a day and as Neil went off to collect the van he saw the eagle coming over again so better views were had. Back to Santa Marta by 17.45 as rain had begun to set in.

Day 7 The final day dawned with low cloud, rain showers and a cooler temperature. Breakfast was taken at 08.30 and we were ready to leave by 09.15. The morning was spent driving a circuit from Trujillo, up to Santa Marta de Magasca and back down to the Cáceres–Trujillo road (along 'Roller Road'). A stop by the bustard area quickly picked up a single Little Bustard standing out on a rock and flocks of Spanish Sparrows were flying around. Then a distant flock of 'waders' were soon identified as sandgrouse – all turned out to be Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. They were quite active flying around in small groups, calling constantly and as we drove up the road we were getting closer views – in total there were about 20 birds. Further up the road, by the dirt track, two Great Bustards were then picked up. Continuing on, a single Mistle Thrush flew up from the side of the road and we were eventually on the 'Roller' section of the drive. European Rollers were soon seen – a total 11 altogether on the wires and/or on the ground. Another Great Bustard, Lesser Kestrels and a Little Owl rounded off the drive. We then headed back to Trujillo and spent a couple of hours in the town having lunch there before heading south at 14.30. A bad storm hit just before Seville making driving uncomfortable but this soon cleared. Just north of El Rocio we saw hundreds of people in vehicles, with horses and carriages rested up amongst the trees in readiness for the big festival at the weekend. Fortunately they were not in town so we were able to get to the marsh for a final look. There were similar birds as on our previous visit plus seven Greylag Geese and a single Black Tern amongst the Whiskered Terns. We finally arrived back in Matalascañas at 19.00 to check in for our final night.

Day 8 The flight home from Faro left at 10.30 so it was an early start (07.15) from Matalascañas. A few familiar birds were seen on the journey to the airport but nothing new to add to the trip list of 155 species. After dropping Richard off at a local hotel we checked in and were back in Luton by 13.15 where the tour ended.

Neil Gartshore
Birdfinders