

# Spain

## Coto Doñana and Extremadura

18–25 May 2017

### Participants

Stephen Alcock  
Beverley Griffin  
Michael Wallace



**Black Kite**

### Lead by Neil Gartshore

**Day 1** The select group met up at Faro Airport at 11.30 with Neil flying in from Southampton and the rest of the party arriving from Birmingham. Extensive building work in the airport was still causing some chaos (on-going after many years... but hopefully the end is in sight!) Fortunately the car hire company was located off-site so a minibus took us the short distance to the depot and we were soon sorted out and on our way. After a short service station stop to stock up on water and a snack we arrived at the Odiel Marshes. Waders are the attraction here and we had soon logged 10 species as we drove along the road into the marsh: smart summer-plumaged Black-bellied Plover, Sanderling and Dunlin as well as Black-winged Stilt, Common Greenshank, Common Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover and Ruddy Turnstone. Birds of prey included Osprey, Black Kite, Common Buzzard and a Booted Eagle, plus Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill and two Common Shelduck added to our first day's tally. The sky was clear but it was very breezy so we struggled to find many small birds, these were virtually limited to Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola and a few hirundines. After a couple of hours we left for Matalascañas, stopping briefly by one of the lakes just south of Huelva where another Booted Eagle and a Pallid Swift were of note, arriving at the Hotel Flamero just after 18.00 to check in and freshen up before dinner at 20.00.

**Day 2** We started off the day with a 07.00 pre-breakfast sea watch that produced a few birds, mainly Yellow-legged Gulls with smaller numbers of Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Northern Gannets (10), Common Terns (60), Sandwich Terns (12) and two Gull-billed Terns. We also had close views of a Black Kite quartering the shore. After breakfast we were off by 09.00 to the nearby El Acebuche nature reserve where we were to spend the morning. After the drought two years ago and the recovery of the water levels last year, the lagoons were still holding the water but the vegetation around them still hadn't recovered to its previous state (i.e. no tall reeds). There was another noticeable difference this year with most of the trees along the bank between the lagoons and boardwalk either dead or dying and so cover was scarce... although we heard both Cetti's Warbler and Eurasian Golden Oriole (the latter also seen flying around) there wasn't a single Common

Nightingale in this area (it's usually full of their song). There was also a number of dead pine trees dotted around the site including a large clump just beyond the lagoons. Waterbirds seen from the hides were fairly limited but included a female Red-crested Pochard with about nine small ducklings and a handful of Little Grebes and Eurasian Coots. A walk along the boardwalks through the stone pines produced a nice selection of birds including Iberian Magpie, Short-toed Treecreeper, Woodchat Shrike, Dartford Warbler, Crested Tit, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Corn Bunting and, overhead, European Bee-eater and Booted Eagle. After a welcome cold drink in the café we headed to the next reserve on our list, La Rocina. We paid a quick visit across the main road from La Rocina to view the marsh in front of town (El Rocio). There were a scattering of birds across the marsh including a few pairs of Greylag Geese with young, Northern Shoveler and a mixture of herons and egrets. On the far shore we could see around 30 Red Deer, including many fine stags (mixed in with the cattle and horses). As it was approaching lunchtime, and getting very hot, we drove on down to the Palacio de Acebron for a picnic lunch in the shade before heading off on the trail around the lake. We started our walk by going through the area of cork oak woodland where we had at least five Iberian Chiffchaffs (either seen or heard). Around the trail Spotted Flycatchers were plentiful, as were, in smaller numbers, Short-toed Treecreepers. Common Nightingales were singing their hearts out and on two or three occasions birds came out of the thick cover to feed on the open ground giving unrestricted views. Common House-martins were actively nest-building under the eaves of the house. The best bird of the day though had to be a woodpecker. Just as we finished lunch and were heading into the cork oak woodland a woodpecker flew across the path and landed in one of the oaks. Expecting to see its larger cousin we were excited to see that it was in fact a fine male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (a Birdfinders 'first' on this tour). We finished the day with another walk around part of the La Rocina trail. A singing Savi's Warbler was heard but not seen but two European Bee-eaters were more obliging giving great views. It was then back to the hotel to freshen up before dinner at 20.00. With a little spare energy left after dinner we headed off to the dunes on the edge of town to look for nightjars. Unfortunately we lucked out with only one very brief possible sighting (but there were lots of large bats around) and no birds singing. Added to this disappointment we were eaten alive by the bugs and had to contend with a loud background noise of dogs barking before calling it a night.

**Day 3** Breakfast was at 07.00 ready for a 08.00 departure, without Bev who decided to spend the day on the beach, for the Jose Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido along the northern edge of the park. First a stop on the road through the woodland to the north-east of El Rocio, where we picked up Eurasian Turtle-dove and Common Cuckoo (two heard, one seen), before making our way to the start of the 26km dirt track to the centre. A steady drive to the centre took nearly four hours with frequent stops along the way when we saw anything of interest. Undoubtedly the best birds of the drive were two Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on the ground in a field then a single (different?) bird in flight. Other species of interest included Calandra Lark (ca 40 – have been scarce here in recent years), Common Quail (two heard), Montagu's Harrier (two), Short-toed Snake-eagle (one) and a number of Short-toed Larks. We reached the marsh close to the Centre by mid-day and were greeted by the spectacular sight of the tamarisk/scrub alive with birds: Squacco, Purple and Grey Herons, Cattle and Little Egrets, Black-crowned Night-heron and Glossy Ibis – the whole area looked like Heathrow on a busy day! We drove slowly along the side of the marsh until we reached the track junction near the centre – Little and Great Crested Grebes and Eurasian Coots were tending their young in the marsh as we passed and around 20 Lesser Kestrels were concentrated in this corner of the adjacent fields. At the junction of the track more water birds – a fine male White-headed Duck, a number of Whiskered Terns, Black-necked Grebes, a single Great Egret and a single male Ferruginous Duck were additions to the list. Before going in to the centre we continued along the Coto del Rey track as far as the locked gate picking up Collared Pratincole (12), Northern Lapwing (six) and three Spectacled Warbler. By 13.00 the temperature had reached 33°C so a visit to the Centre was a welcomed relief while we had a drink and lunch. Once in the centre we realised why the first part of the marsh had so many birds... there was not a single bird in the centre heronry! In fact, apart from the occasion Eurasian Coot and a couple of Greater Flamingo, there were virtually no birds at all. We asked one of the staff what had happened and the thought was that a family of Foxes had taken up residence and so the birds had moved elsewhere. After a break we

retraced our steps to the start of the marsh – more of the same with the addition of a single Sand Martin – before heading out of the park area back to the tarred road (another Short-toed Snake-eagle, more Lesser Kestrels (making a total of 30 for the day) and two male Western Marsh-harriers were seen. Once on the road we stopped by a group of flooded rice fields. Last year we had seen a large number of terns and gulls, this year not a single one but the fields were covered in Black-winged Stilts (probably a couple of hundred birds). No two years birding in this area are ever the same! We arrived back at the hotel just after 17.00 and freshened up ready for dinner. At 21.15 we went off to the nightjar site again. This time we were a little more successful with a brief view of a Red-necked Nightjar in flight and a bird singing.

**Day 4** Driving over to the east side of the Rio Guadalquivir on a Sunday is always preferable as the traffic is light around Seville. After the heat of the past couple of days, today was overcast at first but the wind was picking up (by the time we got to the Laguna de Medina it was blowing a gale). The water looked like a very choppy sea with white horses covering the whole area. We soon realised that birding was going to be difficult when Michael's hat flew off his head as we got out of the car and, despite a search, we couldn't find it. The next clue was a European Honey-buzzard overhead that we were sure was flying backwards! All we could do was to walk around to the hide taking in what shelter we could from the wind with Common Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola and Cetti's Warbler seen and heard along the way. The hide proved just as birdless with, apart from Mallard, only Common Pochard (two), and singles of Great Crested Grebe and Eurasian Coot and a male Western Marsh-harrier struggling in the wind the only birds seen. Back at the car Steve noticed Michael's hat under a bush just as we were ready to leave (it seemed strange how it found its way there!) The wind was going to play its part for the rest of the day but we decided to carry on with the planned itinerary so headed off to Chipiona by the coast for a lunch stop and to look for Little Swift. In all we picked up four birds but the strong wind and the sand from the beach blowing around made viewing conditions difficult. We didn't fare much better at the Bonanza salt pans. Apart from Pied Avocet and Greater Flamingo in reasonable numbers we only managed singles each of Little Tern and Kentish Plover and three Slender-billed Gulls on the salt pans and Common Ringed Plover and Dunlin flying down the river. The Laguna de Tarelo, just inside the Algaida Pine Woods, had Cattle and Little Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbill, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-heron and Glossy Ibis in the small heronry on the island and after a search we had found four White-headed Ducks (two male, two female) on the lake and two Common Waxbills flitted backwards and forwards across the viewing screen but wouldn't settle. Continuing along the river bank our disappointment that the water levels were low in the main lake was soon forgotten as we realised that there were hundreds of waders on the exposed lake bed. Common Ringed Plover and Pied Avocet made up the bulk of them (with an estimated count of 1000/200 birds respectively). We also picked out a handful of other species – Black-bellied Plover (30), Bar-tailed Godwit (10), Curlew Sandpiper and Common Redshank (5 of each), Sanderling (4), Dunlin (3) and Red Knot (2). Just before leaving the river to head towards Trebujena three small parties of Slender-billed Gulls flew by (a total of 13 birds). After Trebujena the only bird of note was a single Gull-billed Tern over fields before we reached the motorway. With the traffic light again around Seville we made it back to the hotel in good time for dinner, although an overturned car on the road as we were coming into the Seville road system caused a short delay as the police were sorting it out.

**Day 5** With breakfast again at 07.00 we left Matalascañas by 08.00 and headed north to Cáceres, getting there after a brief rest stop by 12.00. We spent the next five hours around the Cáceres-Trujillo steppes covering parts of the Rio Almonte and passing through Monroy and Sta Marta de Magasca before dropping down to the main Cáceres-Trujillo road via the 'roller' road. The river stops picked up a good selection of birds including Hawfinch, Alpine Swift, Eurasian Crag-martin, Egyptian Vulture, Grey Wagtail, Little Ringed Plover and Common Kingfisher while stops overlooking the grasslands found a single (distant) Great Bustard and a single Southern Grey Shrike. The short stretch of road where the main concentration of roller nest boxes are found gave great views of European Rollers – at least 11 birds in flight, on the ground, on the wires, or next to their nest box. As well as the rollers, Little Owl, Lesser Kestrel and Eurasian Jackdaw had also utilised some of the nest boxes. This year we stayed at the Victoria Hotel on the edge of Trujillo, and

arrived there just after 17.00. For our evening meal we headed up into the square and chose one of the restaurants with tables outside – a nice meal accompanied by parties of Common Swifts screaming around the square.

**Day 6** Leaving before daybreak we headed up the road to the Belen Plain on a bustard hunt. We bumped into another English birder who had been there the previous day. The only sighting of Little Bustard was a male at some distance sitting on a rock, showing above the long grass, but was seen well through a 'scope. We had better sightings of Great Bustard though. A party of 16 birds were not too far from the road, again giving excellent 'scope views. Other birds included Eurasian Griffon, Black Kite and Calandra Lark. Our stay at the Victoria was room only so at 09.00 when the nearby supermarket opened we picked up a picnic breakfast and headed to Monfragüe National Park – first stop, the Castillo. As we ate breakfast by the parking area we found Blue Rock-thrush, Black Redstart and Rock Bunting on the adjacent cliff. After breakfast we walked up to the viewing area and the buildings, seeing Cirl Bunting, Hawfinch and Subalpine Warbler on the way up. Vultures were in the air over Pena Rock and a few birds drifted close over the viewpoint, mainly Eurasian Griffons but also a couple of Cinereous Vultures (another five were standing by the edge of the water in the valley below). Finally a single White-rumped Swift made an appearance. We stopped briefly on the road below the Castillo overlooking Pena Rock (Black Stork, Egyptian Vulture) before continuing on beyond the park village (Villarreal de San Carlos) and out along the north road to the edge of the park. The hillside opposite the viewpoint had been cleared of non-native pines but after a short wait we picked up a Bonelli's Eagle coming over the hill and flying away to the south. Leaving the viewpoint we returned to the main road and continued eastwards, stopping at one of the picnic areas for a lunch break, until we reached the Portilla del Tietar. Unusually there were no cars here and as the temperature in the clear sky had hit 35°C we carried on along the road to the nearby restaurant for a welcomed cold beer. Back at the Portilla del Tietar viewpoint we soon picked up Spanish Eagle with frequent sightings over the hour or so we were there. After having our fill of the eagle we headed back to Trujillo, stopped in our tracks around one corner by a Red Deer in the middle of the road (with a Red-legged Partridge close behind). After freshening up back in the hotel we walked up to the square again for dinner.

**Day 7** With another 07.00 departure we headed to the Sta Marta de Magasca road to look for bustards. At the junction to the road we were confronted by roadworks with 'access only' signs. The old road has been widened (but not yet tarred). Ignoring the sign as we were only looking for 'access', we drove carefully along the road stopping to scan over the grassland. At the top of the hill we turned off the road and headed out along the dirt track. No bustards today but we saw Southern Grey Shrike and plenty of Calandra Lark. Just before we started to head back to town a bird flew along the open fence line and landed on a fence post next to the car... a Great Spotted Cuckoo (well worth the bumpy ride along the road!). We checked out of the hotel at 09.30, stocked up with a picnic breakfast and headed north to Torrejón el Rubio stopping on the way by the river for breakfast and watched Eurasian Griffon, Cinereous Vulture and Booted Eagle overhead as we ate. At Torrejón el Rubio we turned off to the west and stopped immediately to watch a group of Eurasian Griffon pass over (about 130 of them plus the odd Cinereous Vulture, and a few Black Kites). Our final stop was a walk down to the site where we have had Black-shouldered Kite in the past but no luck. It was clear and hot again (33°C) but less breezy than yesterday so after our walk we decided to head back to Matalascañas. After a stop at a service station we reached El Rocio by 16.30. We spent an hour in town (very few birds out on the marsh, Whiskered Tern (6) and singing Great Reed-warbler were the pick of them). We left at 17.30 arriving back at the Flameró at 18.00 to check in for our final night.

**Day 8** Our respective flights were due to leave at 12.00 so after breakfast we were on the road just after 8.00am heading back to Faro. After returning the car and checking in the tour finished at the airport ending with a final group total of 153 species for the week.

Neil Gartshore - Birdfinders

