



BIRDWATCHING TRIP REPORT
Extremadura 5th – 12th May 2016

Tour leader – Chris Mills & Ricardo Montero

**Participants:- Tony Beaver, David & Linda Bosworth, Rowland Burgess,
Karen Hunt & Maurice Local**



© Azure-winged Magpie – Chris Mills

ACCOMMODATION

This tour was arranged on a Self-catering basis with a continental breakfast included. The group stayed in two beautiful white washed houses in the small mountain settlement of Cabezabellosa. The houses are lovely traditional examples, set in typical white walled and narrow streets.

Evening meals were not included in the cost of the tour, but were arranged each evening at the local bar & on average a 3 course meal of traditional Spanish dishes with a glass of wine/beer cost 15 euros per person. Packed lunches were also provided by the bar each day at a cost of 8 euros per day.

FLIGHTS

Easyjet flights from Heathrow to Madrid are reasonably cheap and everyone arrived via Easyjet and joined myself on the same flight.

WEDNESDAY 4th MAY - Pretour

I collected Tony Beaver, David & Linda Bosworth, Karen Hunt and Maurice Local on the Wednesday and transported us down to the pre-tour Hotel I had arranged for everyone just a few miles from Heathrow. We met up with Rowland who had arrived independently and we all had an enjoyable evening meal, before setting alarm clocks for an early start and journey to the airport.

THURSDAY 5th MAY

The flight from Heathrow was slightly delayed, but by late morning we had arrived in Madrid airport. We picked up our 9-seater minibus and were soon heading south-west. It was a rather cloudy, but warm dry day. Once we had left the city and started heading into the countryside there was plenty of birds to be seen from the minibus windows! Aerial views of **Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Griffon Vulture, Black Kite, White Stork, Marsh Harrier, Iberian Grey Shrike, Red-rumped Swallow** and **Spotless Starling** were all seen whilst travelling. A **Black Vulture** was worth pulling over for! Everyone was able to get reasonable views of this iconic Iberian species. A roadside stop for some lunch also afforded good views of commoner species, **Corn Bunting, Spotless Starling** plus **2 Black-winged Stilts** flew past.

After lunch it was a short drive to an area of large arable fields. This area is interspersed with some remnant steppe habitat and just off the main road. We were soon enjoying views and the sounds of some good birds, **2 Quail** were calling well, several **Cattle Egret** were feeding close by, **Black Kite, White Storks, Spotless Starling, Corn Bunting, Crested Lark, White Wagtail** and **Zitting Cisticola** were all numerous and lovely introductions. At least **5 Marsh Harrier** were hunting the fields, but these were soon forgotten as a stunning male **Hen Harrier** flew low past us, then a small group of **Bee-eater** perched on the wires, the first oohs and ahhs of the trip!

In amongst the numerous **Crested Lark**, we also found our first **Calandra Lark**, then **2 Short-toed Lark** showed well on the track in front of us. Good birds kept appearing then we must have flushed **2 Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and everyone in the minibus scrambled to get reasonable views in flight. A great start to the trip. We headed back to the motorway and continued heading south west.

We reached the turn off for our village and headed up the mountain, though we were soon stopping!! From the minibus windows it was just incredible to hear the number of **Nightingale**

singing, from every 50m of vegetation! We parked the minibus and spent an hour by the road just below the village and accommodation. Birds were all around us!

The first birds were a real treat with **6+ Golden Oriole**, 1-2 showing well and flashing gold/black as they dashed through the trees. At least **4 Cuckoo** were calling, then a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** called and flew over us, **Serin** were all around us well, displaying and calling. Eventually we had scope views of a **Nightingale** sat singing and a **Cirl Bunting** was also singing and perched by the road. As we reached the village **1-2 Black Redstarts** were perching on the house roofs, though these were a regular feature each morning through the week! We also had nice close views of several **Black Kite** over the trees near the village, also **Red Kite** and **Raven**.

We settled into our accommodation and then had a nice evening meal at the local bar in Cabezabellosa.

FRIDAY 6th MAY

We had breakfast at 7.30am. We briefly watched a smart male **Black Redstart** performing and singing from nearby rooftops. We then headed out, the weather wasn't quite what you expect for the first days of May, grey, cool and drizzling. We headed down into the lower valley where the weather was much improved!

As we drove slowly down the mountain, numerous **Nightingale** were singing and again we had good views of one. Several singing **Golden Oriole** perched in view, then to complete a gaudy collection a **Hoopoe** also perched beautifully on a fence! There was also a singing **Woodlark**, that showed well. A **Cetti's Warbler** sang and unusually also provided good views! Another warbler was delivering a scratchy song, it popped out and was a beautiful **Melodious Warbler**, all yellows and greens! We also watched our first **Azure-winged Magpie**, We stopped again for a pair of **Cirl Bunting**, plus our first **Red-rumped Swallow**. There was lots of **Serin** singing and several showing very, also **2 Raven** flew over calling.

Next we drove the minor lanes on the opposite side of the highway making a series of successful stops, here the weedy verges abound with insects. Sparrows, finches, Corn buntings and larks seem to appear from every roadside verge! We had soon had good views of **Crested Lark**, **Cuckoo**, **Corn Bunting**, **Goldfinch** and **Serin** these species all super abundant!

We then viewed a series of small pools, there was a really nice selection of birds – **2 Great White Egret**, **4 Spoonbill**, **Little Grebe** and **Kingfisher**. Several **Black Kite** were overhead, as were **c10 Booted eagle**, **c20 Griffon Vulture**, **c10 Black Vulture**, several **Buzzard**, **Red-rumped** and **Barn Swallow** plus several beautiful flocks of **Bee-eaters**. We then walked along the field and woodland edge, several **Iberian Grey Shrike**, **2-3 Woodchat Shrike**, **Melodious Warbler**, **Woodlark**, several **Cuckoo** and **Spotted Flycatcher** perched with a **Short-toed Treecreeper** eventually nicely sat on the side of an olive tree.

We then headed to an area of mature olive groves. On arrival a **Quail** was calling, several **Booted Eagles** & **Black Kite** were overhead. After a bit of searching we had great views of **Black-eared Wheatear**, though the real highlight was undoubtedly a singing **Rufous Bushchat**. We also located a **Thekla Lark** whilst searching this area.

We finished off the day with a search for another of the target species in this area. It didn't take too long before everyone was getting excellent scope views of **3-4 Rock Sparrow!** There was also a few **Spanish Sparrow**, a **Little Owl** and a nice colony of **Bee-eater**. We rounded off a brilliant first full day with a nice evening meal at the local bar before heading back to the accommodation.





© Alpine swift – Chris Mills



© Bee-eater – Chris Mills

SATURDAY 7TH MAY

Today we headed to the steppe area to the south! The weather started grey, but it was warm and the winds light so reasonable conditions for exploring this sort of habitat. The beautiful fields here are rolling and full of flowers, with big vistas! We were almost immediately listening to the buzzy, mimicry-rich songs of many **Calandra Lark**. Plus **Crested, Short-toed lark, Corn Bunting, Spanish and House Sparrows**, flocks of **Goldfinch** and the flash of Orange, black and white as **Hopooe** flew past us. We headed for one of the favoured areas and by moving slowly and listening, I suddenly located the distinctive call of a **Little Bustard**. After a few minutes of searching and listening we eventually located the **Little Bustard** initially with just head top views, then good clear views. There were at least **2 Little Bustard** calling but we got good views of the first bird, eventually in flight as well with some partial aerial display. Several stops were made for **Iberian Grey and Woodchat shrike**

A nearby pool hosted **4 Gadwall & a Little Grebe**. Then almost subconsciously I realised I could hear the calls of Sandgrouse, just as I heard them a group of **5 Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew overhead and then out of view. We continued searching along the rough track and fields, the first **Montagu's Harrier** of the day appeared a ringtail dancing along the horizon. Then the nasally, vibrating call of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** could be heard, the first group banked around and then away, but the second group of **4 Pin-tailed sandgrouse** proved to much ore obliging with a really nice flyby at close range. A great start to the day with **2 species of Sandgrouse and Little Bustard**. We drove back to the main track and started to explore areas further east, the sun tried to come out and he warmth encouraged quite a kettle of raptors into the air. We stopped for a nice swirl of vultures that had took to the air. We were well rewarded, **c30 Griffon Vulture, 5 Black Vulture, 3 Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, 2 Red Kite**, many **Black Kite, several Booted eagle and 2 young and 1 adult Spanish imperial Eagle!** Plus a **Black Stork** flew over as well, wow, a fantastic selection of birds!

Next we stopped off for lunch at a river bridge, it was quite hot now and whilst we ate lunch there was a lovely collection of Swifts and Swallows. At least **10 Alpine Swift**, were banking down low past us, these birds are the real masters of aerial supremacy! Also several **Crag Martin** and **Red-rumped Swallow**. A nice surprise were great views of a singing **Western Subalpine Warbler**, also nearby several **Sardinian Warbler** as well.

We next headed towards a road with a colony of Roller and Lesser Kestrel, we were soon getting great views of **Roller** perched atop the roadside wires, and also several striking male **Lesser Kestrel**. We looked hard in a good area for Great Spotted Cuckoo, but didn't see or hear them. We then headed further east and started looking for Great Bustard, after an hour or so we had not seen them, the higher vegetation in May making searching a little tricky! We then came across a new hide near to where I had seen them before, as we entered the hide tow other birders announced they were watching two males displaying. Sure enough **2 male Great Bustards** were displaying, if a little half-heartedly! We were just chuffed to watch them!

We made a final stop in the plains and were able to watch several **Montagu's harriers** hunting, including the **scarce Montagu's Harrier black morph form** – a picture is below.

A great day finished off with another fine meal and wine at the local bar.

SUNDAY 8TH MAY

We got up this morning to rather unusual weather for early May in Spain! Cool and wet, with low cloud. I decided the best option was to visit a wetland area of rice-fields and a river valley where hopefully the weather was less of a factor to the birding!

We then drove west to an area near Gallisteo, it was evident that the usual area for Penduline Tit was unsuitable, as it was under water!! However, from the bridge we had superb views of **Pallid and Common Swift**, both hawking low over the water, they were joined by **House Martin, Barn & Red-rumped swallow**. We also had excellent views of singing **Melodious Warbler, Nightingale** and several **Golden Oriole**.

It was then a short drive to some rice field pools. The fields were nice and wet and full of birds! Even the miserable weather couldn't dampen our spirits and it had actually stopped raining now! We were greeted by **100's of Cattle Egret, 40+ breeding Black-winged Stilt, 9 Spoonbill** and **100's of White Stork**. We then started to look more carefully through the masses. Careful searching revealed **8 Ringed Plover, 2 Common Sandpiper, 2 Wood Sandpiper, Redshank, Snipe** and **Ruff**. Then another scan and this time **2 Collared Pratincole** were found sitting tight amongst the furrows, a lovely haul of birds! Nearby along the hedges, **Woodchat** and **Iberian Shrike** all showed very well. Then a group of **30+ Bee-eater** appeared, with several perching up close to the minibus. We noted a couple of the "*iberiae*" form of **Yellow Wagtail**. The hedges also revealed **2 Red Avadavat**, several **Zitting Cisticola** and **Stonechats**.

The weather continued to improve and so we journeyed to the world-famous, scenic and bird-rich Monfrague National Park. Raptors were in profusion, and at our very first stop we had a late lunch and quickly scored with good views of **Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed and Booted Eagle**, and numerous **Black Kite** and a distant **Bonelli's Eagle**. Far better views of **Peregrine** visiting its nest site. Also notable here was numerous **House Martin**, plus **Crag Martin**, good views of **Red-rumped Swallow**. A beautiful singing male **Blue Rock Thrush** was just below us on the crags, plus **Black Redstart, Rock Bunting** and **Blackcap**.

The drier weather broke again and we suffered several heavy showers, so we moved on to another vantage point, by which time the showers had given way to drier conditions. This year the **Spanish Imperial Eagles** showed very well and we watched them sit atop the hillside opposite, they entertained us by chasing after the several of the surrounding Vultures! A female **Marsh Harrier** flew overhead, and a singing **Subalpine Warbler** performed very well.

A good day, despite at times rather heavy showers!



© Little Bustard – Chris Mills



© Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – Chris Mills



© Montagu's Harrier dark morph – Chris Mills



© Woodchat Shrike – Chris Mills

MONDAY 9TH MAY

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The weather was still grey and damp high up in the village, but the cloud had lifted sufficiently to explore the nearby woodland. The beautiful wooded hillsides of Cabezabellosa are excellent for some of the sort after birds. Exploring this area afforded good and improved views of some of the commoner species, **Short-toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch**. But will be best remembered for great views of several target species! First, great close up views of **Western Bonelli's warbler** singing just above our heads, then really nice views of **Iberian Pied Flycatcher**, flitting beautifully at eye level! A **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** then showed briefly, calling as it disappeared into the oaks. Next **2 Common Redstart** were heard singing, though just fleeting views! More **Cuckoo** and **Golden Oriole** showed up, then as we moved into the more open areas **Hoopoe** and **Melodious Warbler**. We moved higher up and into the rocky areas with low bushes, the **Woodlark** were showing very well, A **Spectacled Warbler** was singing and displaying and after a little while we got good views as it perched on top of the low shrubs.

We lunched and then in the afternoon we headed over to Arroyocampo a wetland site, with surrounding dehesa. At the wetland, Herons, egrets and other waterbirds were plentiful. The star attraction greeted us at the start of the track, a pair of **Little Bittern** were backwards and forwards from a nest site. Several **Purple Heron** were also in evidence, as well as **Great Egret** and **Little Grebe**. Several **Purple Swamphen** appeared and disappeared amongst the reedbeds and pools. Whilst a few **Gull-billed Tern** and several **Marsh Harrier** gave a fly-bys. A singing **Savi's Warbler** was close by but refused to show. A **Great Reed warbler**, was a little more obliging. We then drove to another area of the wetland, here there was a nice drake **Garganey**, plus **Green Sandpiper**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Greenshank**, **Redshank** and good views of **Bee-eater** perched in trees and sitting on the ground.

We then headed off into another scubby area and after a little searching we located a **Black-winged Kite**, a charismatic and sought after species of the area. There were also quite a few **Azure-winged magpie** as well in this area.

After a good day we returned and enjoyed a fantastic seafood paella dinner at the local bar!

TUESDAY 10TH MAY

The weather continued to make some of the birding tricky, with today proving difficult in windy and wet conditions, exceptionally unusual in second week of May!

We headed back into the plains to try and locate Great Spotted Cuckoo, but really the weather won today! We still enjoyed a repeat performance of many of the Steppe birds, lots of **Calandra**, **Short-toed and Crested Lark** along with **Iberian Grey Shrike**, **Hoopoe**, **Bee-eaters**, another **Little Bustard**, more **Montagu's & Marsh harrier**, **Griffon**, **Black** and **Egyptian Vulture** ensured we were all entertained and in good spirits!

In the afternoon we visited the pools and village areas nearby the village, dodging the heavy showers. Whilst the weather really curtailed a good effort to look for Orphean warbler, we were still seeing lots of great birds – including **2 Hawfinches** that flew over. We were also amused by a **Woodchat Shrike** that was managing to keep itself dry tucked under the branch of a big tree. Also **2 Little Owls** appeared to be scowling back at us in the rain!

We went back to the accommodation and enjoyed a late afternoon cup of tea after a slightly damp day, before heading to the bar for dinner.



© Griffon Vulture – Chris Mills



© Roller – Chris Mills



WEDNESDAY 11TH MAY

The weather had improved for our last day and we headed up to the high mountain area. We stopped off in Hervas where we had easy and great views of a pair of **Black-bellied Dipper**, plus **Grey Wagtail** and several **Black Redstart**.

We then headed higher up, as we neared the top of the mountain we realised that the very top was still shrouded in cloud, as well as an inch of snow covering the ground and a cold wind! So we set about birding just below, we started off with nice views 2 male **Ortolan Bunting**, one of them singing and showing beautifully. The main target species in the high areas is the beautiful form of Bluethroat – ‘*azuricollis*’ (‘Gredos Bluethroat’) – we soon located 2-3 male **Bluethroat** singing and had lovely views of this fantastic looking bird.

A male **Northern Wheatear** showed briefly, plus several **Skylark** were singing overhead. We then dropped back down the mountain, **1-2 Woodlark**, plus great views of singing **Whitethroat**. We next drove over the mountains and broke off for a coffee in a very beautiful Spanish mountain town. Just before the town we had good views of **Rock and Cirl Bunting** feeding on the ground.

We then headed into conifer forest and after a couple of stops we eventually secured good views of **Coal** and **Crested Tit**. Then a little higher, we had a stunning close up of a singing male **Firecrest**. We continued heading up, the valley was beautiful with hilly deciduous woodland, meadows and pine. Another stop and this time great views of **Nuthatch**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Western Bonelli’s warbler**.

By late afternoon it was time to head back to the village, so everyone could pack for an early morning drive back to Madrid airport.

We had a final evening meal in the local bar and said fond farewells to Miguel & Ricardo.



The group in the bar at Cabezabellosa

THURSDAY 11TH MAY

We left the accommodation early at 5am and arrived at Madrid airport with plenty of time to board our flight back to the UK. I drove the group from Heathrow back to Norfolk, except Rowland who was heading south and we all said our farewells after a great trip.

TOUR OVERVIEW

An excellent tour with a total of **145 bird species recorded**

Future Tours

If you are interested in joining us in Extremadura then we have tours in **April 2017**, please contact us for details.

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