

GRIM REAPERS TOURS VISITS EXTREMADURA, APRIL 2004

April 2004

by John Rayner

Thursday April 29th

The team, Miguel Crawley, Marco Hamilton, Hugo Pulsford, Miguelito Passant and Juan Rayner took an EasyJet flight from Liverpool to Madrid arriving at 16.00. The tour began inauspiciously for Miguelito at John Lennon Airport when he was caught paperless in the loo. He desperately searched his rucksack but, with limited choice, was faced with the difficult decision to use either his sandwiches or the aluminium foil wrapping. Stoically he ate the sandwiches then used the foil. Ouch! But they breed 'em tough in Radcliffe.

On arrival at Madrid Barajas airport the baggage collection and car hire formalities (Seat Alhambra) were quickly completed and, with Marco as our driver, we set out on a very circuitous route to Extremadura. The feared rush hour on the Madrid motorway ring roads failed to materialise and, having passed through some torrential showers, we covered the 140k to Laguna Miguel Esteban, in the windmill covered district of La Mancha, in around 1½ hours. Laguna Miguel Esteban is a superb wetland lying 2k SW of the village of Miguel Esteban, which is on the CM-310 between the E-5 and AP-36.

Not quite knowing how to tackle this large reserve we drove up to the nearest screen hide and got off to a 'cracking' start as Hugo announced there were no less than 9 **White-headed Duck** displaying in front of the hide. In the furore that followed Miguelito had further misfortune as his Kowa 'scope rolled off the bench and hit concrete, cracking the plastic case! Juan, not to be outdone, managed to detach the eyepiece from his 'scope in the same instant and roll it around the opposite end of the hide. Laurel and Hardy couldn't have done it better!

Back to birding and a welcome supporting cast of **Red-crested Pochard**, **Black-necked Grebe**, **Spoonbill** and **Great Reed Warbler** were further complemented by our only real chance of the trip to see waders, represented by **Black-winged Stilts**, **Snipe**, **Redshank**, **Wood Sandpiper** and **Ruff** (including a stonking black-phase male in full dress). It was difficult to drag ourselves away from this reserve which deserved a couple of days instead of a couple of hours but, reluctantly leaving **Whiskered** and **Black Terns** in the rear-view mirror, we headed north-west via Toledo passing 1 **Short-eared** and 3 **Little Owls** as dusk fell. Thus we arrived at 22.30 for a late check-in at Hotel Husa Talavera in Talavera de la Riena. A quick burger and chips plus a couple of cervesas and we crashed out. An excellent start and, bar the 'scope incident, everything was going to plan.

Friday April 30th

The car was packed by 07.15 despite some biological alarm clocks failing to ring and the weather promised to be warm and sunny. Our first planned stop, Embalse de Azútan, was a superb re-acquaintance with Iberian birding. **Nightingales** abounded, **Melodious**, **Sardinian**, **Cetti's** and **Subalpine Warblers** showed easily, **Bee-eaters** called overhead, **Hoopoes** and **Golden Orioles** flew by. Elsewhere **Bearded Tits** 'plinked' in the reeds and **Fan-tailed Warblers** 'zitted' above **Purple Herons**, whilst **Purple Gallinules** potted and a pair of **Golden Eagles** displayed on the far side of the reservoir. We can only dream of our local Rezza producing the same!

Onward to our second stop near Calera y Chozas for our first of 14 **Great Bustards** plus a superb lek of male **Little Bustards** giving their ridiculous calls, but sadly no Sandgrouse. **Marsh**, **Hen** and **Montagu's Harriers** were duly admired in close succession, and **Corn Buntings** were everywhere. **Woodchats** and **Southern Grey Shrikes** were also plentiful and a roadside stop gave us a pale phase **Booted Eagle** and **Short-toed Eagle** circling together close overhead.

Weak cries from the troops complained that breakfast was a tad overdue and the ground agents were cruelly re-christened 'Slim Reaper Tours'. Our intrepid navigator (food's for wimps) weakened and we enjoyed an extremely late breakfast of lomo, patatas and double coffee con leche at around 15.00.

Thus fortified we admired not only Oropesa's magnificent mediaeval castle, with its stunning views over the plains, but also the wheeling **Lesser Kestrels** and **Crag Martins** overhead plus a multitude of nesting **White Storks**. Storks are welcomed as bringers of good luck and, if so, Oropesa has it in spades. However, none of this luck rubbed off on Miguelito whose constant battle with all things mechanical hit another mini-crisis when, with much muttering and incantations, the film was violently ripped from a misbehaving camera and discarded. Should have changed the battery!

Still lots to do on this rather full day and our next call was to Presa de Valdecañas where **Egyptian, Black and Griffon Vultures** flew overhead and a pair of **Black Wheatears** were discovered nesting on the dam itself. A **Crested Tit** showed rather more easily than a reluctant **Golden Oriole** and **Serins** added to the continental flavour with their scratchy song.

Back through Azután, with more **Lesser Kestrels**, we heading towards Monfragüe but as we entered the National Park the weather suddenly worsened and by the time we got to our appointed stop at Portilla del Tietar it was cold, windy and raining. Nevertheless we waited till dark but the Eagle Owls must have thought the weather a little too inclement and wisely stayed in their cave. Another late check-in at the Hotel Carvajal in Torrejón el Rubio, another late meal and our first encounter with our much stressed and completely unsmiling hostess rounded the day. (If you have ever seen Kathy Bates in 'Misery' you'll get the drift).

Saturday May 1st

Up early to grey skies and persistent heavy rain so we adopted a rapid change of plan and headed for a local site given to us by a friendly Spanish birder the previous evening. Soon we were watching a magnificent female **Spanish Imperial Eagle** in pouring rain as she umbrella'd her chick with half spread wings, displaying the white forewing flashes to perfection. This was a new bird for each of the party (the only bird of the trip to have this distinction) whilst **Woodlarks** and **Azure-winged Magpies** added to the experience.

Breakfast of chorizo omelette and coffee was taken in Trujillo whilst waiting for the weather to improve. On this occasion the statue of the mighty Pizarro merely presided over a cheese festival that was taking place in the magnificent fifteenth century Plaza de Mayo and, after a good soaking on the walk back to the car, we headed out to the Spanish steppes proper on the road to Monroy.

This road is given as site 10 in Muddeman's 'A Birdwatching Guide to Extremadura' and most of the predicted birds were where they were supposed to be. First to fall were **Thekla Larks** which were studied critically for the first and last time as their shorter bill and crest and gingery uppertail coverts were noted, and **Crested Larks** were further down the road for comparison. **Corn Buntings** were abundant and jangled their keys from every available perch. Passing a huge colony of **Spanish Sparrows** further variety was provided in the form of 5 **Great-spotted Cuckoos**, **Red Kite**, a couple of **Stone Curlews**, a cowering Leveret and a perched **Black-shouldered Kite** but, although we scanned many ploughed fields, Sandgrouse remained elusive.

The weather was steadily improving and the sun shone allowing close examination of **Calandra Lark's** black underwing contrasting the white trailing edge and **both Bustards** were discovered. Magnificent **Black** and **Griffon Vultures** soared together extremely closely overhead, the former casting a huge shadow and almost eclipsing the sun. Many more vultures were drifting our way and the reason became obvious as around the corner we found a scene reminiscent of the African savannah. 45 **Griffons** and 5 **Black Vultures** bounced and leapt, bounded and hissed as they fought for prime position at a carcass whilst **Black Kites** and **Ravens** stood back and looking on enviously. A bridge over the Rio Almonte was supposed to hold breeding Alpine Swift but we only found **House** and **Crag Martins**.

So, back into Monfragüe and a visit to Arroyo de la Vid provided **Cirl** and **Rock Bunting** plus the only **Kingfisher** of the trip. A meal stop in Villarreal de San Carlos proved something of a problem as the Black Stork Restaurant was open for business and had all facilities except for food. A nearby barkeeper was persuaded to serve omelette bocadillos and coffee and so saved the day. In high spirits and fine, if cold, weather we set out once more for Portilla del Tietar, pausing only to admire a pristine **Black-eared Wheatear** and a **Black Stork** at the nest tending its chick.

Hours passed..... 2 **Blue Rock Thrushes** tried to please and a calling **Red-legged Partridge** demanded attention by almost pecking tripod legs but, despite what appeared to be a perfect moonlit opportunity, the Eagle Owls again failed to appear. We had now put some considerable time in at Portilla del Tietar: this bird was becoming a problem!

A little earlier, when two **Red-necked Nightjars** called 'che-tuk, che-tuk, che-tuk' somewhere away to the right only one of our party had the nerve to walk away from the owl site and was rewarded with views of them chasing above the water. Back at Hotel Carvajal, our hostess, now a sort of female incarnation of Basil Fawcett ("this place would run bloody smoothly if it wasn't for the guests") very reluctantly opened the bar as we reviewed another successful day and made plans for tomorrow.

Sunday May 2nd

No rain, so we decided to give the **Spanish Imperial Eagle** another visit. On this occasion the chick was visible, with brave **Spanish Sparrows** and **Spotless Starlings** using the basement in same nest, but the adults were temporarily absent, then the female called and landed nearby, a magnificent sight. A wheezy Greenfinch-type call was followed up and found to come from a **Rock Sparrow** whilst a **Hawfinch** flew overhead. We had worked our way through our hit list with reasonable efficiency but not come close to any Sandgrouse so a decision was made to search the steppes again around Monroy.

But first we sought provisions and the very friendly bakery in Torrejón was successfully raided, with custard filled croissants a particular hit. After an apparently obligatory tour of the bakery we were soon away but the steppes mostly yielded more of yesterday's goodies, although in addition Miguelito picked up a *sharpeirace* of **Green Woodpecker** in flight. Two magic moments, however, were noteworthy. A pair of **Black-shouldered Kites** floated on territory close to the road and nearby no less than 7 **Montagu's Harriers** were so unconcerned by our presence that one almost joined us in the car. It was rather disheartening to realise that the 7 birds before us, quartered one small field, represented a large proportion of the British breeding population: and this sums up birding in Spain versus birding in most parts of England in a nutshell.

As we made a different crossing of the Rio Almonte further downstream we found a second pair of **Black Wheatears** plus **Red-rumped Swallows**, **Cirl** and **Rock Buntings** but where were all the Alpine Swifts? Surely they would be at our next location. More heavy rain so we grabbed a quick meal at the Restaurante Monfragüe in Torrejón (grandmother's soup and hake in prawn sauce recommended) whilst the showers passed over.

A little later we were standing on the ramparts of the Moorish Monfragüe Castle enjoying eyeball to eyeball contact with **Griffon Vulture** and **Red-billed Chough**. Still too early though for White-rumped Swift and Alpines were also conspicuous by their absence. A mangy vixen scavenged around the car park and welcomed Juan's offering of the flattened Blue Tit that Miguel denied driving over. Pass that lie detector! A nearby party of **Long-tailed Tits** looked extremely dusky compared with their UK cousins.

As it was Sunday the hordes of locals at Peña Falcon outnumbered the vultures but 80+ breeding on the ledges was a spectacle to behold (vultures that is, not locals). More **Ravens**, **Black Storks** and a couple of **Booted Eagles** added interest. We walked a track at Fuente de Frances and the water level was so low that a bridge, once a White-rumped Swift breeding site, was fully exposed. Rather quiet and yet another completely swiftless bridge! The only trip tick here came in the form of an equally dusky plumaged **Jay** making a clean sweep of the corvids.

The evening weather had turned cold and wet, not helpful for owl watching, and for the third night running we approached Portilla del Tietar, but this time without much anticipation. An **Alpine Swift** flew quickly by to prove they do exist in the park - but what a surprise when, at 21.00 and to an incoherent babble of instructed directions, the **Eagle Owl** vacated its nest hole and quickly bounded over rock ledges to end up half-hidden in a stunted tree. Later it flew to an exposed rock ledge where its throat feathers could be seen puffed out with the repeated effort of delivering a resounding, echoing 'HOO'. What a beast and an excellent birthday present for Juan. Next, a brief night-time stop at Mirador de Bascula but no Nightjars were heard and the only eye-shine was from Red Deer. Back at the hotel our hostess allowed us one celebratory bottle of wine but no refills - the bar was quickly shut!

Monday May 3rd

We had settled our bills the previous night so we were clear for an early start, as today would be a long drive. (It's worth noting that the previous morning we had passed birders kicking their heels outside the hotel having booked breakfast but waiting for the restaurant to open – perhaps better to stay flexible. Try the very friendly bakery!)

A succession of short stops and walks from Arroyo de la Vid up to Monfragüe Castle gave us **Hawfinches**, **Sardinian Warblers**, **Woodlarks** and **Nuthatches** but not the desired Western Orphean Warbler. We exited the Park via Plasencia and yet again it was cold and damp, unlucky for us as it had been 32°C in Madrid one week earlier. A coffee stop at Reserva Gargantua de los Infernos near Jerte soon warmed us up and also provided **Grey Wagtail** and **Black-bellied Dipper** for the trip totals.

Next, a roadside stop mentioned in Muddeman as good for Honey Buzzard, gave us **Northern Wheatear**, 4 **Golden Oriole**, a dark **Bonelli's Eagle** and an extremely ragged **Booted Eagle**. We swapped gen here with a carload of Swedish birders who just happened to be passing by, although it soon became apparent that our information was more immediately useful, as theirs was for Andalusia! So, as the weather closed in a little more, we pressed onward for a cultural/food stop at Ávila.

Film buffs will know Ávila as the setting for 'The Pride and the Passion' but, despite a remarkably heavy representation of Guardia Civil, Sophia Loren was not in evidence. The only 'big guns' around were being interviewed for television and it transpired that we had just missed a procession in celebration of Saint Teresa of Ávila. This is the same saint who apparently once famously said, "There is no such thing as bad weather. All weather is good because it is God's." Hmmm!

Restaurantes in downtown Ávila looked a tad upmarket but we piled in anyway and we must have presented a cold and bedraggled sight because the waitress turned up the heating high enough to melt Juan's rucksack – literally! Having got this far a walk round the famous 12th century walls was a must and they didn't disappoint (Ávila is said to be the finest walled city in the world).

But, we had further to travel and Segovia's famous Alcazar castle, said to be the source of inspiration for Walt Disney's fairy castles, was only viewed from a distance. It was here that Juan the navigator made his one blunder, foolishly taking a detour along a road that was yet to be drawn on the map. A roadside discussion ensued on the usefulness of compass bearings but things were quickly

righted and we cut north, passing **Tawny Pipits** and **Northern Wheatears**, to drop our bags at the Hotel Villa Sepúlveda in, you've guessed it, Sepúlveda.

We hastily piled back in the car and set out for Ermita de San Frutos. Now a lot has been written about this site and its famous birds so we were prepared for a wait of somewhere between 10 minutes and 10 hours. On arrival the temperature was 4°C but the wind howling across the open rocky landscape reduced this somewhat, it felt positively Arctic. No birds were seen, no birds were heard. Not good!

As it was only 16.00 we were perhaps a little early so we proceeded to visit the monastery in its imposingly high position overlooking the Duraton Gorge. Apart from topside views of **Griffons** and **Red-billed Chough** birds were few, but **Thekla Lark**, a very black **Black Redstart** (race *aterrimus*), and a brief **Dartford Warbler** braved the gale.

We thought the 'Streamless Valley' might offer a little more shelter and so it proved as we found **Woodchats**, **Sardinian Warblers** and our first **Western Orphean Warbler**. And, returning approximately one kilometre back towards the Ermita, we eventually heard 2 distant Dupont's Larks. However, shortly after 19.30, we gave in to the ever-colder weather and returned to our hotel hoping for an improvement in the morning.

At the hotel a monolingual British birder provided some light entertainment as he attempted to check in by barking his surname loudly at the bemused hotel owner. Shouting loudly is not the way to get past a language barrier and the conversation went something like:

"Walker".

"Qué".

"WALKER".

"No comprendo". Shrug.

Well the name might have been Walker, or else that famous spelling mistake, but Miguelito's fluency in Spanish came to the fore once again and another happy ending ensued. The hotelier put on a great meal and we supped beer and wine, watched Spanish soaps on the TV and wondered what the morrow might bring.

Tuesday May 4th

Out at dawn and the morrow brought frost! Ice had to be scraped from the windscreen. Back at the site we were not surprised to see Mr Wa*ker ploughing a lonely furrow straight through the Dupont's Lark's nesting habitat. He was not seeing the birds!

Now, before we left the UK we had been given a strategy to maximise our chances at this site.

1. Don't attempt to hunt down a Dupont's Lark, they scurry rodent-like between grassy clumps and rocks and easily evade their pursuers.
2. Try to gain some elevation by standing on roadside boulders (or the car roof!) and scan at a range of 50-100m.
3. In short, only bird from the road.

This eventually proved to be sound advice, with at least 2 **Dupont's Larks** 'scoped as they perched on nearby rocks, giving their 'rusty gate' song. They were even 'scoped as they sang in a fluttering, round-winged display, but only reached an elevation of about 50m before closing their wings and plummeting, beak first, like a stone. Even Mr W. saw them! **Skylark** was added to the lark list and a last look at the 'Streamless Valley' yielded a **Dartford** and 2 more **Western Orphean Warblers**. It is worth noting that this same valley, where it extended to the north of the road was ploughed, a fact that hasn't been mentioned in any report so far. Is this a recent event and could the rest of this valley be threatened?

For once we were ahead of schedule and took about 1½ hours to reach Puerto de Navecerrada. In a complete role reversal Hugo and Miguel spurned the potential coffee stops pointed out by Juan, such was their enthusiasm to get to grips with our last quarry. The high point of this pass is 1860m and on this day we were touching the cloud base.

Quite a bit of snow remained and in a very cold, swirling mist we eventually caught up with 6 rather flighty **Citril Finches**, plus **Coal Tit** and **Duncock**. Our last mid-morning coffee and bocadillo warmed us up again, the clouds temporarily cleared, and we took a

quick look around the large car park at Valcotes (4 **Citril Finches**) and the Valdesqui ski station (2 **Citril Finches**) then it was time to head for home.

A last fortuitous stop at 1500m on the descent to La Estación gave us **Crested Tit** and our last new bird for the trip in the form of a pristine, freshly laundered **Western Bonelli's Warbler**.

Just over an hour later we had negotiated the M40 Madrid ring road and returned the hire car at the airport. The return flight was fairly uneventful except for the noisy Celtic fan on lager with whisky chasers who was singing 'Wild Rover' down Miguel's ear. At the phrase "And I've spent all me money on whisky and beer", Miguel's helpful suggestion "Should have spent some on singing lessons" almost prompted Bannockburn 2 until the joke was explained to our northern inebriate and peace returned. Despite this anecdote our EasyJet flights were efficient, cheap and punctual – recommended.

So, we were left to ponder on our 5 birding days in Spain. 140 species (including 2 heard, Nightjar and Quail) was perhaps not the longest list but it was rich in quality and creditable given the mixed weather. We really only dipped on 4 species: Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Penduline Tit and Spectacled Warbler. Each picked a bird of the trip and everyone opted for something of a cameo event, so Spanish Imperial Eagle tending chick, Little Bustards fart-lekking, Black-shouldered Kites on territory and the close Montagu's Harrier display were each chosen as favourites, with the Little Bustards winning the day.

The route was planned and navigated by Juan but special thanks must go to Marco and Miguel for their impeccably safe chauffeuring, to Miguelito for his invaluable ability to converse fluently with our Spanish hosts and Hugo for finding the 'birthday present' Eagle Owl. The company and craic were excellent and all in all it was superbly enjoyable trip, Grim Reaper Tours must get on the road again next year.

I would like to acknowledge the help and inspiration given by John Bannon and recommend John Muddeman's excellent and useful book 'A Birdwatching Guide to Extremadura'. Credit also the Extremadurans for not having exterminated Great Bustards, which must look like large, slow-flying, free dinners to many. Roast Bustard? Reminds me of a limerick, but that's another story...

John Rayner, May 2004

www.manchesterbirding.com