

EXTREMADURA & ANDALUCIA, May 2010

Five Birdwatching Lads From St Mary's College Blackburn Reunite After 34 Years!

by Mark Jarrett

Hotels

Hospederia Parque De Monfrague, Torrejon El Rubio – nights of 8-10th May

Vime Tierra Mar Golf, Matalascañas – nights of 11-12th May

Hotel San Jose Del Valle, Tarifa – nights of 13-15th May

Reference Books

Where To Watch Birds Southern & Western Spain by Ernest Garcia and Andrew Paterson

A Birdwatching Guide To Extremadura by John Muddeman (currently out of print)

GeoCenter Euro Road Atlas – Spain & Portugal

DAY 1

We flew into Madrid, collected the hire car and travelled the 250 km or so to our base in Torrejon El Rubio, situated on the southern edge of Parque Natural de Monfrague. The weather was cloudy and cool with one or two showers and apart from the odd brief stop, all our birdwatching was done from the car. Despite this we clocked up a respectable 37 species including Red Legged Partridge, Cattle Egret, Grey Heron, 40 White Stork, 25+ Black Kite, 1 Red Kite, 1 Short Toed Eagle, 1 Montagu's Harrier, 8 Buzzard, 1 Lesser Kestrel, 20 Kestrel, 1 Cuckoo, Swift, 4 Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Swallow, House Martin, Stonechat, 2 Cetti's Warbler, 6 Southern Grey Shrike, 2 Woodchat Shrike, 8 Azure Winged Magpie, Spotless Starling, Serin and 6 Corn Bunting. Bird of the day for me, however, was 3 Black Winged Kite. As I was driving, my views were less than good and, unfortunately, these were the only Black Winged Kites of our trip.

DAY 2

Our appetites wetted by the array of birds seen yesterday, we were up and out by 6am, arriving at an area of plains west of Trujillo, by 7am. We headed down a suitable looking track just off the Santa Marta road and within ten minutes had seen our first Great and Little Bustards. We wandered down the track for half a mile and in this general area saw 4 Little Bustard and 7 Great Bustard. Cattle Egret were common in the fields, many White Stork were seen, as were Black Kite, 2 Red Kite, Buzzard and 1 Montagu's Harrier. Nearby was a good vantage point at a small rise where we noted a Black Winged Stilt by a pool with several Bee-eater a few yards away. In the field opposite we put up 5 Black Bellied Sandgrouse and later saw 2 Stone Curlew. A couple of Great Spotted Cuckoo had been observed at distance and other birds added included 30 Calandra Lark, Crested Lark, 1 Fan Tailed Warbler, Azure Winged Magpie, Linnet and Corn Bunting.

We then headed back to the hotel for breakfast before making our way into Monfrague, hoping for some decent raptors. Stopping en route we added Cirl Bunting to our growing list. At Monfrague, we parked at the lower car park and walked up to the castle. Griffon Vulture seemed to be everywhere including about 60 in one group, soaring on thermals. Several Black Vulture were also seen, along with 4 Egyptian Vulture. As we approached the castle, two star birds were added. Firstly Spanish Imperial Eagle, then a group of around a dozen White Rumped Swift. A Peregrine was seen above nearby Pena Falcon, where we also saw Griffon Vulture, Black Redstart, Booted Eagle, Egyptian Vulture, Short Toed Eagle, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and another Spanish Imperial Eagle. Before the day was out, we would have seen a total of 4 of these majestic birds of prey. We continued to Fuente De Los Tres Canos, Mirador De La Trajadilla, Mirador De La Bascula and finally, Portilla Del Tietar. Other birds added here included 4 Black Stork, White Stork, Pallid Swift, Wood Lark, Crag Martin, House Martin, Red Rumped Swallow, Grey Wagtail, White Wagtail, Nightingale, 1 Sedge Warbler, 1 Subalpine Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Short Toed Treecreeper, Red Billed Chough, 3 Raven and 1 Rock Sparrow.



Above: View from Castillo de Monfrague



Above: Castillo de Monfrague

DAY 3

Another pre dawn start to the plains west of Trujillo, arriving just after 7am. We retraced part of yesterday's route, seeing similar birds, plus a nice Melodious warbler, before continuing on to San Marta, then heading to the crossroads where a left takes you to Monroy. This reliable Montagu's Harrier spot didn't disappoint, 16 birds noted giving excellent views. After breakfast we made our way back to Monfrague as far as the car park area below the castle. 30 Griffon Vulture, 6 Black Vulture, 7 Egyptian Vulture, 1 Golden Eagle. A few Booted Eagle, several Black Kite, 1 Red Kite, Short Toed Eagle, Kestrel and Buzzard were observed in raptor heaven.

In the afternoon, we headed for Rio Almonte bridge, south of Monroy, where we dipped on Black Wheatear. Continuing south on the road towards Caceres, we spotted a lone Roller on wires near many of the nestboxes erected for them. We then turned left onto a narrow road, leading towards Santa Marta from the west, passing delightful plains/steppes. A couple of Roller provided superb close views before we came to a ruin offering great views of a colony of Lesser Kestrel. Common Cuckoo and 3 Great Spotted Cuckoo were added along with 60 Calandra Lark, 15 Short Toed Lark, Crested lark, Stonechat and 3 Little Owl. Towards the end of the road we approached another great area for Bustards. By the end of the day , we had seen 6 Little and 14 Great. At least 30 Roller boxes had been put up around here and our daily total increased to 10. Pin Tailed Sandgrouse were heard but unfortunately not seen. Other birds of note seen during the day were 1 Gadwall, 4 Red Legged Partridge, 20 Cattle Egret, 1 Black Stork, White Stork, 1 Hobby, 4 Stone Curlew, 1 Little Ringed Plover, 2 Black Bellied Sandgrouse, 2 Turtle Dove, 1 Kingfisher, 20 Bee-eater, Hoopoe, 1 Wood Lark, Crag Martin, Red Rumped Swallow, 1 Nightingale, 2 Blue Rock Thrush, 6 Fan Tailed Warbler, 2 Spotted Flycatcher, 2 Southern Grey Shrike, 5 Woodchat Shrike, Azure Winged Magpie, 12 Raven, 2 Rock Sparrow, Serin, 1 Rock Bunting, and many Corn Bunting. An earlier stop at a Spanish Sparrow site, north of Monroy, produced 10 birds amongst the White Stork nests. Finally, we drove to Trujillo and the bull ring there, where a dozen or so Lesser Kestrel were watched at close quarters.



Above: Pena Falcon, Monfrague



Above: Rio Almonte, Extremadura

DAY 4

Again, a pre dawn start to yesterday's area of Roller boxes/plains. In addition to those birds seen yesterday, 1 Quail, 1 Little Grebe, 1 Tawny Pipit and 2 Golden Oriole were added. An Eagle Owl perched on telephone wires (seen from the car) and 12 Black Bellied Sandgrouse were worthy of mention. Pin Tailed Sandgrouse were again heard but, frustratingly, not seen. After checking out of our hotel, we headed for Campillo De Deleitosa where we dipped again on Black Wheatear, although we did see another Golden Oriole and a few Thekla Lark. Prior to our long journey south we did manage to see 3 Black Eared Wheatear in a small plot of farmland by the road.

A few kilometres north of Matalascañas in Andalucía we passed the large lagoon at El Rocio where 80 Greater Flamingo were briefly seen. The hotel at Matalascañas was ideally situated by the beach where 6 Yellow Legged Gull, 1 Cory's Shearwater, 3 Gannet and 3 Sanderling were added to our list shortly after arrival.



Meadow, Extremadura

DAY 5

Today was Coto Donana day and not only that, we got a long lie in until 6.30 am. To start the day, a brief sea watch produced 5 Common Scoter, 1 Gannet, 2 Lesser Black Backed Gull and 1 Yellow Legged Gull. Out at 7.30, we skirted the western side of the reserve, first visiting El Acebuche which was fairly quiet, although a single Red Knobbed Coot was seen together with Red Crested Pochard, Common Pochard, 3 Golden Oriole, Gadwall, Great Reed Warbler and Azure Winged Magpie amongst others.

We continued to La Rocina and despite several coach loads of school kids, it proved fairly productive with 2 Savi's Warbler, 2 Cetti's Warbler and never to be repeated views of 4 Nightingale, sat out in the open. Across the road is the lagoon at El Rocio, which we passed last night. In warm weather and pleasant sunshine we observed Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill, 1 Marsh Harrier, Black Winged Stilt, 2 Little Ringed Plover, 1 Little Stint, 3 Dunlin, Redshank, c.15 Gull Billed Tern, several Whiskered Tern, 1 Black Tern and Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail.

Next stop was The Marismas and the Jose Valverde Centre. En route, a small pool produced 30 Ringed Plover and nearby, a lovely Short Toed Eagle together with several Bee-eater, Reed Warbler, Blackcap, Nightingale and Cetti's Warbler. Part of the route to the Jose Valverde Centre is a tortuous, pot holed dirt track, 21 km long, but the birdwatching is different class. Either side of the track are fields, pools, areas of marsh, drainage ditches and streams, in an area of wilderness. At the end of the track is the Centre, consisting of pools, reedbeds, adjacent farmland and trees & shrubs. Combined (route and Centre), we saw 30 Night Heron, 50 Squacco Heron, Cattle Egret, 30 Purple Heron, White Stork, 500 Glossy Ibis, 35 Spoonbill, 200 Greater Flamingo, 200 Black Kite, 2 Griffon Vulture, 3 Short Toed Eagle, 4 Marsh Harrier, 2 Montagu's Harrier, 3 Buzzard, 6 Booted Eagle, 3 Lesser Kestrel, 3 Kestrel, 1 Purple Gallinule, 1 Greenshank, 70 Black Winged Stilt, 35 Avocet, more Gull Billed Tern, 6 Pallid Swift, 5 Short Toed Lark, 3 Lesser Short Toed Lark, Crested Lark, 2 Sand Martin, Red Rumped Swallow, 3 Yellow Wagtail, 6 Fan Tailed Warbler, 5 Great Reed Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, 5 Raven, 2 Tree Sparrow and Corn Bunting. Particularly impressive were several separate flocks of Collared Pratincole, in total numbering 65 birds.



Jose Valverde Centre, Coto Donana

DAY 6

Out again at 7.30 am, we today made our way to Brazo Del Este, before continuing on to our next base at Tarifa. In a more eastern section of Coto Donana, terrain and bird life were very similar to yesterday. No hides or visitor centre, you are simply out in the open. Notable sightings being 3 Little Bittern, 6 Night Heron, 4 Squacco Heron, Cattle & Little Egret, 1 Great Egret, Grey Heron, 30 Purple Heron, 4 Glossy Ibis, 25 Spoonbill, 4 Greater Flamingo, 12 Black Kite, 1 Red Kite, 2 Griffon Vulture, 4 Short Toed Eagle, 3 Marsh Harrier, 2 Montagu's Harrier, 2 Buzzard, 3 Kestrel, 20 Purple Gallinule, Black Winged Stilt, 80 Collared Pratincole, 10 Kentish Plover, 1 Common Sandpiper, 20 Gull Billed Tern, 6 Turtle Dove, 1 Little Owl, Swift, 7 Pallid Swift, 6 Bee-eater, 1 Calandra Lark, 3 Short Toed Lark, Crested Lark, 1 Wood Lark, 10 Yellow Wagtail, 6 Nightingale, 12 Stonechat, 20 Great Reed Warbler, 6 Fan Tailed Warbler, and 1 Savi's Warbler. A highlight for me, was a single Penduline Tit giving all too brief views. Nearby, several Black Faced Weavers, colonised/introduced, were seen.

En route to Tarifa, we called at Laguna De Medina, where we added a White Headed Duck along with 25 Black Necked Grebe and Melodious & Sardinian Warbler.

DAY 7

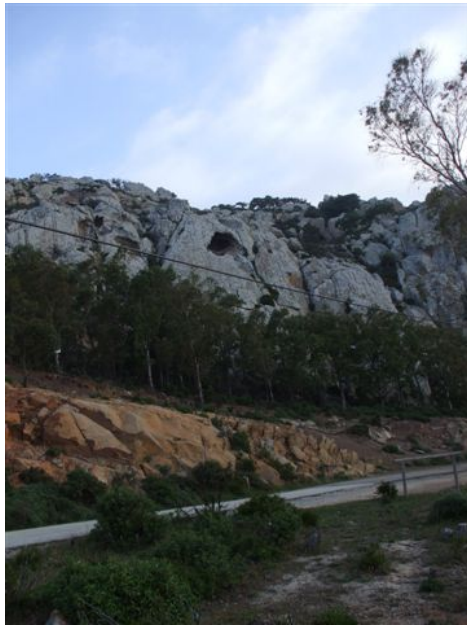
First stop today was the Sierra De La Plata and the Little Swift cave, only a few kilometres from our hotel. We arrived at 8am and over the next hour we waited patiently before two birds put in brief and separate appearances. Also around were Common Kestrel, Griffon Vulture, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martin and Iberian Green Woodpecker. Next stop Tarifa beach where 1 Lesser Crested Tern was observed, perched on a buoy amongst good numbers of Sandwich Tern. Also seen here were 12 Sanderling, 8 Kentish Plover, Yellow Legged Gull, Gannet and 1 Cory's Shearwater.

We then moved inland to La Janda Plain where our main find was a single Olivaceous Warbler amongst 2 Whitethroat, Sardinian Warbler, Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler, White Stork, 12 Lesser Kestrel, Black Kite, Griffon Vulture, Short Toed Eagle, Little Ringed Plover, Turtle Dove, Bee-eater, Crested Larks and the usually abundant Corn Bunting. Brief views were had of a single Sacred Ibis, status unknown. After a light snack we then drove through the Valle De Santuario looking for various warblers, although brisk winds made it difficult. Sardinian Warbler, Stonechat, 3 Short Toed Eagle and Griffon Vulture were noted.

We finished the day with another sea watch adjacent to Tarifa harbour. 2 Lesser Crested Tern, Sandwich Tern, Balearic & Cory's Shearwater, Gannet, 1 Razorbill, Lesser Kestrel and 1 Hobby were worthy of mention.



Above: Donana scene



Above: Little Swift Cave, Sierra de la Plata



Above: Meadow, Valle del Santuario



Above: Adjacent to Tarifa harbour

DAY 8

Whilst in the Tarifa area the winds had, unfortunately, been both strong and blowing from a west/north west direction. Raptor migration was obviously affected and it was also late in the season for birds coming through. However, we still decided to make our way to Gibraltar and after a brief walk on the cliffs, positioned ourselves at Jews' Gate to see what was moving. After a few minutes the first couple of Honey Buzzard were spotted. In the two hours we were there, 101 drifted lazily through together with 5 Black Kite and 1 Short Toed Eagle, the latter looking suitably tired. A pair of resident Peregrine were active and also seen were 2 Blue Rock Thrush and 1 Shag.

In the afternoon, we visited the cork woods north of Tarifa, a beautiful area of heavily wooded sierras. The weather was pleasantly warm and we did two or three small walks which uncovered 2 Iberian Chiffchaff, 2 Bonelli's Warbler, 2 Firecrest, 2 Short Toed Eagle, 4 Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Bee-eater and Nightingale amongst others.

DAY 9

Two hour drive to Malaga for early flight home, nothing to add.

We never set out to break any records although, obviously, we had our target species, virtually all of which we saw, including Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black Winged Kite, the three Vultures, the two Bustards, Black Bellied Sandgrouse, Collared Pratincole, the 2 Swifts and various Herons. Disappointingly, we dipped on Bonelli's Eagle, Black Wheatear and Pin Tailed Sandgrouse, although we did hear the latter.

A total of 168 species were on our list as 'seen' and which included Black Faced Weaver & Sacred Ibis.

Postscript

One of the lads stayed on for another two days and managed to add Bonelli's Eagle and Black Wheatear to our list, making a final total of 170 species seen.

Mark Jarrett, June 2010

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