

# Spain's Coto Donana & Extremadura

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 30 April 2006

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Report compiled by Andrew Impey



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                                      Tony Joyce  
                                      Kate Miller  
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## Day 1

**Saturday 22nd April**

### London – Madrid – Trujillo

Having arrived on time at Madrid airport we marvelled at the wide open spaces of the terminal and the efficiency of the inter-rail, however, we spoke too soon and the car hire company let the side down. So after a siesta and a heavy downpour, we finally got our van and we were off. To make up time we headed straight for the hotel and on the seemingly quiet roads we made good time. We soon ticked off Cattle Egret and White Stork – two species that we would come to know very well on this trip. Both Red and Black Kites were quartering the roadside verges and to complete the trio a Black-shouldered Kite hovered over the nearby fields. We arrived at the hotel at Trujillo by early evening in time for a beer and our first look at the local Lesser Kestrel population before dinner.

## Day 2

**Sunday 23rd April**

### The Plains

Having missed the turning by a matter of meters and then gone on an extended detour we finally arrived at the Belén track. We were soon rewarded with an excellent close view of a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoo. This species was very confiding and also very noisy as it flew around the grassland. Hoopoes were around every stone and Woodchat Shrikes were too busy catching insects to bother about our presence. There appeared to be large numbers of raptors out on the plains so we proceeded further down the road. It wasn't long before we were treated to a large group of vultures on the deck, presumably waiting for the morning air to warm up. They were mostly comprised of Griffon Vultures but we were also lucky enough to gain excellent views of the rarer Black Vulture which noticeably kept themselves to themselves not wishing to mix with the other rabble. Quail could be heard calling from the long grass and the air was filled with the trills of Calandra Lark. A lone Little Owl was obvious on a stone wall but alas the Bustards were proving much more elusive, only showing for one second at a time. Just before we headed off for lunch in the square we were treated to a very close view of a Short-toed Lark but then our stomachs got the better of us.

After lunch we left the locals to their siesta and headed for St. Marta de Magasca and having asked the ice-cream man for directions it wasn't long before we were watching a Short-toed Eagle slowly drifting over the plains. Tens of vultures filled the sky and the occasional Booted Eagle joined in the party. The fields were a mass of yellow and purple flowers and made for a fantastic back drop. Crested Larks scuttled around the roadside verges and large flocks of Cattle Egrets were aggregating around the sheep, many in their very smart breeding plumage. Our first Bee-eaters graced the scene and not to be out-done, the stunning Montagu's Harrier were quartering

seemingly every field. We had to wait until mid afternoon before we ticked our main quarry of the day. Having struggled in the morning, Little Bustards suddenly decided to put on a show; one bird in particular was blowing raspberries from a ridge with complete abandon. Two Great Bustards were then spotted in flight and with a little searching we managed to locate them and get some cracking close views of these huge birds. At one stage we had both species in the same field of view – hard work but well worth the wait.

## Day 3

Monday 24th April

### Monfragüe

After an early morning trip to the supermarket it was off in the direction of the national park at Monfragüe and it wasn't long before we had our first views of Azure-winged Magpies in the roadside trees. We pulled into the lay-by at Penafalcon with a large number of cars and birders present so our expectations were high. Griffon Vultures were well into their breeding season and large chicks were visible on the rock face across the water. A Peregrine put in a brief and somewhat distant appearance but an Egyptian Vulture proved a lot more exciting. All around us there were birds singing including Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Serin and Rock Bunting. Up and down the gorge Crag Martins were zipping about together with the beautiful Red-rumped Swallows which occasionally perched in the tree a matter of meters away. We managed to find a Black Stork nest but being sat down in the nest it was difficult to see the brooding adult. It wasn't until its mate arrived for a change over that we got a good look at these great birds. As if one nest wasn't good enough, Kate then went and found a second, this one just a few feet from the water's surface.

Our lunch spot by the reservoir gave us the chance to check out the amazing House Martin colony on the bridge. The air was filled with their chattering and the occasional screech as an Alpine Swift arrowed through the air with its usual immense power. Lunch provided us with the opportunity to enjoy listening to our first Nightingales of the trip whilst at the same time enjoying our second cake of the day – hotel cake secreted in a lunch box by Rupert.

After lunch we drove round to the dam where Turtle Dove was added to the list and Tony was luck enough to catch site of a Golden Oriole (which we did at least all manage to hear). Our final mission for the day was to walk up the twisty dead end lane which leads to the castle ruins. An amazing view waited for us all and in addition to Griffon Vultures at head height we saw the expected pair of Chough.

## Day 4

Tuesday 25th April

### Heading south

Our drive south first involved a stop off at Mérida where we heard Cetti's Warbler and Great Reed Warbler but only really saw the reeds wobble. A little further down the road and we were admiring the Stork 'city' by the side of the mighty Guadiana River. At the same time we heard the unmistakable song of the Golden Oriole and after a little searching saw a fantastic male bird bathing on the far bank. A stop off at Embalse de Alange afforded us excellent views of the large Alpine Swift colony but the Eagle eyrie was sadly empty. However, fortune was on our side because just as we were driving away a large raptor soared slowly over the top of the bus. Sure enough it was an adult Bonelli's Eagle showing all the ID features and performing really well. Spanish

Sparrow was the only other addition to the trip list and having safely negotiated Sevilla, we arrived at our hotel with a scooter out-rider to show us the way – what a nice chap!

## Day 5

Wednesday 26th April

### Saltpans

Our first port of call this morning was the Bonanza saltpans. At first site it seemed like there was little about but with some careful searching, things started to appear. Huge numbers Avocets and Black-winged Stilts were very evident, as were the noisy Little Terns and Gull-billed Terns above our heads. Many of the Curlew Sandpiper were resplendent in their summer plumage and there were several small mixed flocks of Dunlin, Little Stint, Sanderling and Kentish Plover. Yellow Wagtails added a touch of colour to the muddy surroundings, amply backed up by some very bright Flamingos. However, star of the show (for some of us anyway!) were the Slender-billed Gulls. Beautiful plumage, graceful feeding behaviour and all round corker of a bird (still not convinced are you?!).

Our next stop was Laguna da Tarelo which proved to be a cracking little spot. White-headed Duck was our main target bird and there were plenty of them on offer but they were ably supported by Black-necked Grebe, Little Bittern and a very portly looking Purple Swamphen. After lunch in the trees we had a second visit to laguna and added Garganey to the list. Sardinian Warbler and Tree Sparrow were calling throughout the forest canopy and occasionally we were able to get a good view of both species. During the afternoon heat we drove through the forest and at the far end we could marvel at the noisy nesting Black Kites, easily the most common species of raptor. A drive out on to the saltings produced singing Short-toed Lark, excellent (yet brief) views of Great Reed Warbler and a few solitary Collared Pratincoles. Leaving the potholes behind we returned to our hotel and ventured out on the streets of Sanlucar to return to our favourite restaurant for more fantastic Spanish cuisine.

## Day 6

Thursday 27th April

### Sanlucar – Doñana

The co-drivers were really into the swing of things now and by-passing Sevilla was a piece of cake. Arriving in the Coto Doñana national park we turned off the main road and headed for the forest, only to find a new road layout under construction. Undeterred we ventured into the forest to see what was about and assess the habitat for Nightjar spotting. We appeared from the forest in a flower meadow almost at waste height. Not too many birds but some interesting insects and amazing flowers. Lunch was then taken outside the Hotel Toruño with the wonderful setting next to the marsh.

Despite very high water levels following the recent heavy rains there were still plenty of birds to see and we spent the afternoon marvelling at the Whiskered Terns and Flamingos. We watched in amazement as a Spoonbill grappling with a huge crayfish and by a freaky coincidence this same sight had been described identically almost word for word in the previous year's trip report – same bird do we think! Reed Warblers were calling in-front of the hotel and a noisy flock of Greenshank flew in to roost for the evening.

## Day 7

Friday 28th April

### Coto Doñana

The heath at Acebron proved to be a wonderful morning's birding with some star species on show. Thekla Lark, Dartford Warbler and Melodious Warbler were all in good numbers and were really putting on a show, often at close range. Once within the forest we escaped the noisy school children and headed for the circular boardwalk. Nightingales were singing from every bush and there was a cacophony of song. Great Spotted Woodpecker was added to the list and more importantly for some people so was Short-toed Treecreeper.

Lunch was again taken back at the ranch and then it was off to La Rocina. Serins were everywhere in the forest and when they landed on the forest floor we were able to see just how wonderfully marked these little birds are. Distant Savi's Warblers were heard but not seen but a pair of Olivaceous Warbler were much more confiding. Finally we managed to get a decent look at some Crested Tits and that was a perfect end to the day. Or was it? Maybe that accolade should go to the Flamingo dessert in the hotel restaurant! Is there anyone that didn't go back for seconds?!

## Day 8

Saturday 29th April

### Where's that cat?

Our final full day in Spain was spent with José Antonio in the morning. He picked us up at 7.15am and we sent off in his landrover in search of, amongst other things, Iberian Lynx. Alas, we weren't as lucky as last year's group but we were shown fresh tracks on the sandy road and this was still an exciting find. With both leaders sneezing from the coniferous pollen we headed out on to the marsh. Collared Pratincoles were just starting to get active and some of us were lucky enough to see some Pin-tailed Sandgrouse shuffling through the undergrowth (unfortunately some of us only saw their rear end). With good water levels there were birds a plenty and it wasn't long before we were scanning the pools for what we could find. Summer plumage Spotted Redshank were smart birds to latch on to and then Rupert got his wish with a pair of Stone Curlew.

Arriving at the José Valverde visitor centre we were suddenly surrounded by a throng of birding activity. Excellent views of Little Bittern were obtained as more than one individual balanced on the tops of the water side vegetation. Great Reed Warblers were very evident and looked monstrous as they quacked their heads off at each other. José also had a trick up his sleeve – he knew of a well known Savi's Warbler song perch and the bird didn't disappoint. What an incredible noise to come out of such a tiny little bird. A couple of White-headed Ducks were nothing new but José informed us that this was the first time he'd seen them inside the reserve boundary in 15yrs – so an interesting sighting in amongst some lovely Black-necked Grebes. Once inside the centre we settled into our packed breakfasts and refuelled on some much needed caffeine (Mike was a happy man). The water levels this year meant that the breeding birds in-front of the centre were at full capacity. Glossy Ibis and Little Egrets jostled for the best positions and Purple Herons stalked the edge of the reeds. Rupert was lucky enough to have a brief view of another Golden Oriole but I think the star birds were the Squacco Herons. Such incredible head plumes and with their blue bills, they really made for a stunning sight. On the road again and we gained excellent views of both Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks. Towards the end of the morning we were discussing how the flycatchers were distinct by their absence and very late this year, then as if by magic both Pied and Spotted Flycatchers turned up on the fence heading back to the hotel – spooky!. Having thanked José for a great morning and after a light lunch we set off into the afternoon heat. Our intended destination

never materialised due to the appearance of three unexpected roundabouts but we managed to find some lovely woodland to wander through and a very friendly farmer who suggested we should probably try somewhere else if we were after birds (or at least I think that's what he said). Plenty of Bee-eaters and a pair of Booted Eagles and that was about it really.

After much debate we decided on an early evening meal before our night sortie into the forest. With dusk fast approaching we agreed that we couldn't possibly turn down dessert (given the previous two evenings offerings) but the Nightjar gods were shining on us because it turned out to be just fresh fruit. So with fruit tucked in our pockets we headed for the forest. With a new moon in the sky we would have a very small window of opportunity with fading light but we needn't have worried. Within 15 minutes of arriving we heard the strange and very characteristic call of the Red-necked Nightjar and after a few more minutes we had our first bird flying low over our heads. We had about eight birds in total and it was very exciting as they appeared out of the gloom. The only words spoken in that 3 minute period were "there's another one". A truly memorable end to a fantastic trip.

## Day 9

Sunday 30th April

### Homeward bound

With bags packed we headed to the airport and given the very foggy conditions we decided to have the Nightjars as our last birding experience of the trip. After saying good bye to Tony and Kate at the airport we headed for departures to share out the remaining cake – "oh go on then" said Julian, "just one last piece".

So a wonderful trip, with some stunning birds and a small group that bonded brilliantly. Many thanks to one and all for making it so memorable.

## Bird list

Common name	Scientific name	May 2006							
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					6	2		25
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					4		4	8
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					3			6
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1					
Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>					2			4
Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>				1	6			16
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>								9
Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>						1		
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	100	200		150	200			200
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1	1	1	15			40
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1		6	35	10	20
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					2	2		12
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	12	50	25	75	100	30	15	200
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			3		2			
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>								120
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					1	4	11	3
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>					45	79	22	200
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					2			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2		3	6	6	8	20
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					1	2	12	16
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>						3	1	
Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>					1			
White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocophala</i>					32			2
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>					28	21	12	40
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					22			20
Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1						1	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	8						
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	5	50	25	10	30	18	14	50
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		200	200	4	12	2		
Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		9	8					
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			3					
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>						1	2	3
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circu pygargus</i>		14		3	1			1
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		1	6		3	3		5
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>				1				
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		3	2			1		1
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		3	1			3		9
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	6	4	4	2	3	2	1	
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	10	14	12	8				
Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1					
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		H						H
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2	2					4
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				3	6	4	3	8
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					4	100	40	200
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>					2			
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		9						
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		2						
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosette</i>					200		1	1
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		2		2	100	75	40	50
Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>								2
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>					9	5	1	200

Common name	Scientific name	May 2006							
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					5			20
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>					20			4
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>					48			3
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					2			1
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					12			
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>					8			
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>					85			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					20			35
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					2			
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					4	1	6	12
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>								3
Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						23		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							9	6
Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					4			
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>					1			
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>					60			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>					11			
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>					2			
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>					4			
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>					10			
Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>					35			
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>						80	25	40
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>					4		4	6
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>								3
Feral/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>								
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		6	4	4	5	2	4	16
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		8	6	4	4		3	4
Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			2		1	2		4
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			H				H	
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus glandarius</i>		4						
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1						2
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>								H
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	✓
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>								8
Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>			12	60				
Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>								8
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		4	6	4		4	25	✓
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		20	H	2		1	3	3
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							2	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	4	✓
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>							9	
Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		1			1			6
Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>								4
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		12						6
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>						1		14
Crag Martin	<i>Hirundoe rupestris</i>		1	50					
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>		8	30	10	1	1		4
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>					20			14
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1					
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2					



Common name	Scientific name	May 2006							
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1				2	
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			1				3	H
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		7		2			6	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			2	2				
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			3	1				
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		5	6	6		2	4	6
Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>							H	1
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				1			6	H
Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>							H	H
Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>				H	3			10
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>						H	6	H
(Western) Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Hippolais opaca</i>							2	
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>							20	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>							14	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>					12		3	8
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2				2	3
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>								2
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>								3
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>							2	3
Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus ultramarinus</i>			4				4	3
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		H	2	2	8		18	6
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>							2	1
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					2		8	
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		10	2					
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		6		1	1	10	6	12
Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>			1	1				1
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		12	20	10				
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			1					
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			4
Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>			15	8		10		2
Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			2					
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		4						
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		1			2			2
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				3				
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					20	H	3	
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			10		H	2	10	10
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			1					
Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			8		12	15	50	25
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>						2	H	H
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		10	12	8	6	25	18	25
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>			3		6			
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			1					
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1					
Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓