

# Spain's Coto Doñana & Extremadura

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th – 25th April 2022

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Bonelli's Eagle



Hoopoe



European Roller



Spanish Sparrows

Tour report by Byron Palacios, images by Jacqueline Lant



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Tour Leader: Byron Palacios with Simon Woolley with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Sunday 17th April

### Lon Gatwick – Seville – Dehesa de Abajo – El Rocío

We started very early this morning in order to catch our flight to Seville, arriving in the very picturesque Andalusian city at the scheduled time! The group reassembled after collecting our luggage and proceeded to meet up the other participants who were already in Seville. We sorted out our vans and drove up out of the airport, heading west and towards the village of El Rocío, making a little birding detour to a wetland reserve known as La Dehesa de Abajo. Here, we had great views of European Bee-eaters, Serin, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Little Egret, Common and Red-crested Pochards, Greater Flamingos, plenty of Black Kites, the elusive Ferruginous Duck, Squacco Heron, plenty of White Storks, Sand Martins and the rare Red-knobbed Coot, Marbled Duck and a young White-headed Duck. We then continued our drive to El Rocío where we had a break after checking in to our lovely hotel; we then gathered together for a birding session right behind our lodge which produced plenty of Greater Flamingoes, Whiskered Terns, Spotless Starlings, Black-winged Stilt, Glossy Ibises, Eurasian Spoonbills, Ruff, amongst many others.

After a very long day, we retired to our rooms in order to get ready for dinner.

## Day 2

Monday 18th April

### El Rocío marshes – El Acebuche – La Rocina

The early morning looked promising as gorgeous sunshine raised over the lake behind our hotel! The temperature felt perfect for our birding activities and after an early breakfast, we took a nice short stroll along the lake's promenade which produced fantastic views of Western Purple Swamphen, Glossy Ibis, Great Reed Warbler and a very close Little Bittern. More birds such as Collared Pratincole, Greater Flamingoes, Eurasia Spoonbills, Northern Shovelers and many more. After a couple of hours of great birding, we walked back to our hotel in order to get in our vans and set off to the area known as El Acebuche, where European Bee-eaters, Hoopoe and Iberian Magpies were seen just as we drove in. We then took a stroll along the boardwalks which produced great views of Red-rumped Swallows, Woodlark, Iberian Magpie, Woodchat Shrike, Dartford Warbler, Siskin, Sardinian Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Corn Bunting Garden Warbler, Nightingale, Tree Sparrow, White Storks, Black Kites, and loud Golden Orioles which weren't really seen. As lunchtime approached, we enjoyed of a delicious picnic lunch on the site.

After lunch, we moved to a different area right in the outskirts of El Rocío - the marshes of La Rocina. Here, we found interesting birds such as Iberian Chiffchaff, Sardinian Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, European Stonechat, Black-crowned Night-Heron, more Spoonbills, Greater Flamingo, Purple Heron, Eurasian Cuckoo, Booted Eagle, amongst others.

After this nice day, we retired to our hotel in order to take a break followed by drinks, checklist and a very tasty local dinner!

## Day 3

Tuesday 19th April

### Doñana National Park (Royal Track – Coto del Rey – José Antonio Valverde Visitors Centre)

Another gorgeous morning in El Rocío with a breathtaking sunrise hitting the marshes! After an early breakfast, we met up with our local ranger Ana in order to drive us in the core area of Doñana National Park. Ana and myself drove their 4x4 vans along the Raya Real (Royal Track) meandering along the sandy tracks which produced fantastic views of the Mediterranean forest and entire Stone Pine woods. We soon found lots of Red Deer hanging around alongside plenty of Iberian Magpies, Black Kites and Spotless Starlings; we then arrived to the area known as Coto del Rey where we took a nice walk along the Dehesa habitats and Mediterranean forest. We had fantastic views of European Bee-eaters, Sardinian Warblers, Iberian Grey Shrike, Booted Eagle, Eurasian Kestrel, a pair of beautiful Great Spotted Cuckoos, Thekla's Lark, amongst many others. A short distance away, the old Palacio del Rey was spotted hidden amongst a patch of eucalyptus trees, so we approached finding lots of Spanish Sparrows and European Bee-eaters along the way, unveiling from a closer distance a majestic endemic raptor, the powerful Spanish Imperial Eagle; we enjoyed watching this fantastic bird through our telescopes!

After enjoying this first visit to the heart of Doñana, we drove back to El Rocío, then drove a short distance to enjoy our picnic lunch at el Palacio del Acebrón, taking a nice walk afterwards which produced great views of Crested Tit, Woodchat Shrike, amongst others. Some of us also enjoyed finding interesting butterflies and wildflowers. We then drove back to our lodge in El Rocío in order to take a break and to get ready for our afternoon session in Doñana National Park. We drove again along the Royal Track passing areas which produced plenty of Little, Great and Cattle Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbills, Zitting Cisticola, and lots of Spanish Yellow Wagtails. We took a stroll along the Marisma (flooded heathland) which was drier than usual this year, yet it produced a great amount of birds such as Purple Swamphens, Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank, Barn and Red-rumped Swallows, Sand Martins, Great Reed Warbler. We arrived at the José Antonio where we had great views of lots of Greater Flamingos, Glossy Ibis, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Black-backed Stilts, Pied Avocets, Lesser Kestrels and more. We took a quick stroll from the visitor's centre down to the canals where a distance patch of water revealed a few species of wader such as Spotted Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover and the elusive Temminck's Stint.

After this enjoyable late afternoon, we started our drive back to El Rocío in the early evening admiring a taste of the gorgeous sunset-to-be, when; all of a sudden, a creature crossed the track in front of Ana's van and her eyes could not believe what she was seeing – and neither could we! The majestic shape of this male Iberian Lynx emerged from the bushes crossing the track right in front of our van! The feline was relaxed and did his confident walk and posed for our lucky cameras showing off his beauty... What a moment, what an animal...it was simply a fantastic experience we all enjoyed dearly!

After this amazing day, we arrived to El Rocío just in time for celebrations drinks and a delicious dinner to celebrate a simply wonderful day in Doñana!

## Day 4

Wednesday 20th April

### Doñana National Park (Isla Mayor – Aznalcázar – Río Tinto – Bollullos Par del Condado)

It was another early start of the day. After a good breakfast, we set off to explore the northeastern entrance of Doñana National Park, driving through Villamanrique de la Condeza and finally by Isla Mayor, from where we drove onto a track full of Corn Buntings, Crested Larks, Zitting Cisticolas, Spanish Sparrows, amongst others. It was a very windy day but at least dry, and after managing to find a good number of birds along the roads such as Iberian Magpies, Woodchat Shrikes, Linnets, Goldfinch, White Stork, Spanish Yellow Wagtails, Crested Lark, we made a stop by the old water pump from where we found a colony of roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons. Following the track from the pump, we had terrific views of the elusive Lesser Short-toed Lark that showed really well and close for a good time. This was alongside Greater Short-toed Larks so we had a great comparison between these two species. We continued our drive along the long tracks making a stop near a very nice flooded area from where we took a walk along the track in search for many key species; Great Reed Warbler, Purple Herons, Marsh Harrier and large flocks of Spanish Sparrows were seen.

The wind was picking up, so we left the area in search of some shelter. We moved out of the park driving northeast towards a corner of Río Guadamar, right between the villages of Pilas and Aznalcázar, where the old country park and botanical gardens were set. We had a great time enjoying our lunch here and also great views of Western Olivaceous (Isabelline) Warbler. After visiting this nice spot, we drove to another interesting place located about 25 minutes north - the shores of the Río Tinto on the outskirts of La Palma del Condado. The unique red and orange colour derived from its chemical makeup gives to this river its name. It's extremely acidic with very high levels of iron and heavy metals. The river maintains its colour for an approximate length of 50 kilometers. After the 50 kilometer mark, the chemistry that makes the Río Tinto river so unique appears to slowly decline, as does the odd colouring. The location where the chemistry of the river is altered is near a town called Niebla. Here, many interesting species such as Crag Martins, Little Ringed Plover, Crested and Thekla's Lark, European Bee-eater and Barn Swallows were seen. We also had terrific views of the very handsome Black-eared Wheatear!

After enjoying these sightings, we started to make our way back to El Rocío, making a stop along the way in the village of Bollullos Par del Condado. This village, prosperous and active thanks to the production of local sherry, had a small but picturesque church which has been used by nesting visitors such as White Storks and Lesser Kestrels. And we had fantastic views of them hunting, copulating and flying around the church and on the tower itself - such wonderful sightings! Happy and a bit worn out by the long but good day, we continued our drive back to El Rocío in order to take a break after a long day and to get ready for drinks & checklist. Another delicious dinner was followed by a restful sleep.

## Day 5

Thursday 21st April

### Odiel Marshes – drive to Trujillo – Las Canteras (Extremadura)

We started this morning with a relaxing breakfast and packing all our belongings as we were leaving El Rocío behind in order to start our journey to Trujillo, Extremadura. We made though an hour detour west to the town of Huelva in order to visit the estuary of the river Odiel. This quick visit to this wetlands produced new species for our trip, such as four Audouin's Gulls, Whimbrel, Marsh Harrier and a distance Osprey. We then hit the road

heading straight to Extremadura, making a nice stop in the proximities of Sierra de Aracena where we enjoyed our picnic lunch.

After a couple more comfort stops and some time on the motorway, we arrived at the lodge Las Canteras, located 7 kms north of Trujillo. We got our rooms and we soon started enjoying the surroundings of our new base. We gathered together again for the usual checklist, drinks and dinner, followed by a restful and well-deserved night sleep.

## Day 6

Friday 22nd April

### Santa Marta de Magasca – Monroy Road Belen plains – Trujillo

After breakfast, we started the day positive and full of enthusiasm despite the very wet weather. We drove to the area known as Santa Marta de Magasca. The rain was persistent, but we managed to find a group of Great Bustards grazing along one of the adjacent steps; we managed to get great views of them through the telescopes and binoculars. A single male Little Bustard was also found in this location, singing amongst the Retinto cattle, not far from the Great Bustards location! We also had plenty of Corn Buntings, Crested Larks, European Stonechats and Calandra Larks. After this, and as the bad weather continued, we made a comfort stop in the village of Santa Marta de Magasca that we all appreciated.

After our break, the rain eased off a bit and it was the time to check on the plains along the Cáceres road. It was the perfect time to see lots of Eurasian Black and Griffon Vultures together and on the ground; a few pairs of European Rollers were also seen very well alongside Jackdaws, Calandra Larks, Red and Black Kites, Woodchat Shrikes, Spanish Sparrows and European Bee-eaters. We also spotted a lovely male of Cirl Bunting singing from the top of a tree by the river Magasca. We continued driving towards the junction of Monroy road, making a stop here which produced plenty of Calandra Larks, Spanish Sparrows and a beautiful pair of Montagu's Harrier which showed off very well! A couple of dark morph Montagu's Harriers were also spotted later on along this road; also, a group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were spotted giving us great views of the birds in flight. Then we got fantastic views of one of them as they landed not far from where we were.

As lunch time approached, we thought it was going to be more enjoyable to have our picnic lunch back at our lodge as the weather was still cold and wet. We did that and also enjoyed watching the plains from the lodge's porch. After lunch and a short break, we went out to the field again, this time to explore the plains around the village of Belen. Apart from the obvious common birds, the area was quiet as the rain hit the area harder than we were expecting, so we decided to head back to the lodge to chill in the late afternoon. Some of us went to explore the fortress town of Trujillo.

## Day 7

Saturday 23rd April

### Campo Lugar – Madrigalejo – Sierra Brava Dam – Alcollarín Dam – Madroñera

Today we drove south of Trujillo to the plains of Campo Lugar. After a quick bread stop in the village of Zorita, we arrived on the plains finding a group of Great Bustard straight away. We stopped by the track in order to get telescope views of this wonderful birds, also finding other important birds such as Black-bellied Sandgrouse,

Montagu's Harrier, Lesser Kestrel, plenty of Calandra Lark, Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Stone Curlew, Booted Eagle, Black Kites, amongst others. After this great start of the morning, we drove to the village of Madrigalejo where a coffee break was more than welcome by everyone! Soon after we warmed up, we were back in the field exploring the surroundings of this village where some lovely dehesas are found. Here, we had terrific views of Iberian Grey Shrikes and we also managed to find five Black-winged Kites perched on the holm oaks we all enjoyed watching! We then continued driving through the local thermosolar power station and onto the slip road that led us to the Sierra Brava dam; we spotted Great Spotted Cuckoo, Iberian Magpies, Woodchat Shrikes, White and Yellow Wagtails, Booted Eagle and Crested & Thekla's Larks along the way. We found a nice corner by the dam to have our picnic lunch.

After lunch, we drove towards Zorita, making a little diversion towards the village of Alcollarin in order to visit the dam of the same name. It was very windy at this point and that made birding a bit tricky around the lake; nevertheless, we managed to see plenty of Cattle and Little Egrets, Great Cormorants, Eurasian Black & Griffon Vultures, European Kingfisher, Sardinian Warblers, amongst others. We then continued driving north towards Trujillo, making a stop in the village of Madroñera where we had a good check around its main park in case a roosting Eurasian Scops Owl is found. Sadly, we didn't find any.

On the way back to our lodge again, some of us decided to explore Trujillo as the weather was dry with sunny spells. Back at the lodge, we gathered together for the checklist, drinks and dinner. Some of us drove back to Madroñera after dinner in order to try again for the Scops Owl but there were bizarrely no signs of them.

## Day 8

Sunday 24th April

### Monfragüe National Park

We had a very sunny and beautiful morning, ideal to drive a good forty minutes north of Trujillo in order to explore the popular Monfragüe National Park. We started the visit making a stop in the always productive rock cliffs of Peña Falcon (Salto del Gitano) where we enjoyed watching dozens of Griffon Vultures perched and soaring around the impressive rock formations, and also a few Cinereous Vultures amongst them; a Peregrine Falcon joined them at times flying in and out from the cliff tops. There were also lots of Crag Martins flying very close to us and a beautiful Blue Rock Thrush right on the summit, a handsome Rock Bunting perched on a boulder really well and on the lush sunlight, we enjoy it very much. Other birds such as Black Redstart, Serin, Blackcap, Blue and Great Tits and a lovely Subalpine Warbler were seen here too.

We found two Black Storks in the opposite side of the crags, nesting near the water - very obliging and relaxed, one of them flew in and out of the nest at times. It was great to see these birds. After a good hour enjoying this place, we drove a very short distance and made a quick stop right over the river Tajo bridge from where we had a few pairs of Alpine Swift flying amongst hundreds of House Martins. It was here where a lovely pair of Bonelli's Eagle were spotted really close. They both flew right over our heads and one of them even perched on a bare branch tree right on the opposite shore of the river, flying off again and coming very close to us. What a fantastic sight of this rare eagle! We all had great views of them against the clear blue sky. We continued our birding day around the national park, making a coffee break in the village of Villareal de San Carlos, where we took a little stroll which produced another Subalpine Warbler, Thekla's Lark and a rather elusive Western Orphean Warbler.

After enjoying this spot, we drove down into the river Tíetar dam where we enjoyed our picnic lunch watching the lovely Iberian Magpies getting around us hoping to get a few bits of our food!

The afternoon weather looked promising. We drove along the road that follows the river making a stop at the point known as Portilla del Tíetar. Here, another group of cliffs produced more Griffon and Black Vultures, Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martins and a fantastic Eurasian Eagle Owl we all enjoyed watching! It was incredibly well camouflaged, but we managed to see it thanks to a local lady who knew where she was roosting. Other birds such as European Bee-eaters, Kingfisher, Eurasian Cuckoo and others were seen around here and in a nearby location. As the late afternoon was approaching, we drove towards the village of Saucedilla where we made our last stop of the day at the Arrocampo marshes. It was a bit breezy over here but we managed to see some Grey and Purple Herons, Marsh Harrier, Stonechats, Zitting Cisticolas, amongst others. After an ice cream, we started to drive back to our lodge in order to take a little break prior our last dinner.

## Day 9

Monday 25th April

### Trujillo – Madrid Airport

We started this lovely sunny morning having a nice and relaxed breakfast followed by a nice birding walk around the lodge which produced wonderful views of the nesting White Storks, Eurasian Hoopoes, Woodchat Shrikes, Iberian Magpies, Eurasian Cuckoo, European Bee-eaters, amongst others. We then walked along the access track towards the rear grounds of the lodge and we found a few Great Bustards and also a pair of Little Bustards together – fantastic! A great way to say good bye to this fantastic spot of Extremadura!

We then walked back to the lodge to pack and collect our belongings, followed by a group photo and a warm farewell to our hosts at Las Canteras. We soon hit the motorway straight to the eastern side of Madrid and towards Madrid airport. We arrived in time to check-in and get ready for our flight back to the UK. Some of us continued their travels and we all wished each other the best after a very warm good bye.

We had a brilliant tour exploring two of the most wonderful areas of western Andalusia and Extremadura; its birdlife and wilderness...and the delicious food and drinks of this lovely land and what its people produced for us! It was a brilliant experience for everyone and we all keep those memories in our minds in order to keep them alive every time we talk about Spain.

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