

Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 25 March 2011



Great Bustards at Villafafila



Hoces del Duraton



Wolf viewpoint at Boya



Griffon Vultures at Ermita San Frutas

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Day 1

Friday 18th March

Stansted-Vallodolid-Sepulveda

Fine & sunny; clear blue sky

We arrived at Valladolid in bright warm sunshine and were soon on our way southeast around the outskirts of the town heading for Sepulveda which was our destination for this three day extension to the main Wolves and Bustards trip. Many White Storks, some on nests, Buzzards and a Red Kite were spotted during the journey and near Sepulveda a group of Rock Sparrows were on the wires. We stopped at a viewpoint to admire the town and numerous Griffon Vultures were soaring over it. We soon checked in to our hotel, on the edge of this town situated dramatically overlooking the Duraton Gorge, and set off for Ermita de San Frutos.

A Hoopoe, Crested, Calandra and Woodlarks were seen. Walking down from the car park towards the gorge as the light was fading an elusive singing Cirl Bunting hid from view in the numerous Juniper bushes. The colours of the Sunset behind the Ermita were dramatic. We retraced our steps as it was getting dark stopping in the 'paramo' habitat at the top to listen for Dupont's Lark. We heard the distinctive song of one bird and also from a pinewood in the distance an Eagle Owl was calling. Returning to our hotel Roberto our very attentive English speaking host provided us with an excellent dinner with good local wines.

Day 2

Saturday 19th March

Dry & sunny; warm, after a frosty start;

Sepulveda-Hoces del Duraton

A pre-breakfast stroll down to the river started with a low flying White Stork. Cetti's Warblers were singing from either side of the bridge one being seen speeding from one bush to the next. A Wren trilled and a Chiffchaff was busy feeding in the riverside shrubs. Long-tailed, Great and Blue Tits plus a drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker were seen along with a Black Redstart singing from a rooftop on our way back. Several House Martins were already back from migration and busy searching for insects in the cool morning air

Breakfast done we set off for an exploration of this delightful medieval town and to search for picnic supplies. A White Stork was on its nest on a church at the edge of the square in the centre of town. Many House Sparrows were chattering from the eaves and Black Redstarts were singing their characteristic song. Picnic supplies obtained we wandered round the town and up to the main church above, where there was a vista to the south of the snow-covered Sierra Guadarrama. A Green Woodpecker's yaffle came up from the valley and Griffon Vultures soared overhead. We set off to explore the gorge driving along the south side climbing up out of the valley with more Griffon Vultures and up and through farmland with Crested Larks.

Descending into the gorge again to the crossing point at Cevade de Los Siete Altares we stopped and watched on the bridge over the Rio Duraton. A Firecrest was singing which we managed to see and two Short-toed Treecreepers also were busy in the riverside poplars. Moving on towards Ermita de San Frutos down the rough track from Villaseca we reached the car park which today, a fine weekend, was busy. However we found a quiet spot to have our picnic overlooking the gorge and its numerous vultures. Linnets and Goldfinches were numerous a Thekla Lark was seen and Woodlarks were singing. Later as we walked down to the spectacularly sited Ermita numerous Griffon Vultures were busy visiting their nests and gliding low over our heads. A pair of Egyptian Vultures was very active and many Red-billed Choughs were calling from their gorge nest sites. Our return towards Villaseca produced more Calandra Larks busily displaying and chasing off Skylarks. On wires above a stubble field 300 Rock Sparrows were counted. Back at our hotel we enjoyed an excellent meal before getting to bed in preparation for an early start.

Day 3

Sunday 20th March

Dry & sunny; warm, after a cold frosty start;

Sepulveda-Ermita San Frutos-Cantalejo

We made an early start in the frost at 6.10am heading back towards the Ermita with the Dupont's Lark our objective. As we arrived at a suitable spot down the rough track from Villaseca we stopped and opened the windows, it was very cold and only just starting to get light. There was a dawn chorus of Blackbird, Crested and Skylark song. We then heard the distinctive song of a Dupont's Lark and in the distance another. We searched for the next hour but sadly this most elusive bird managed not to show itself despite extensive searching of every bush and stone. As it got lighter the birds went silent so we returned back along the southern side of the gorge to Sepulveda for a welcome breakfast. On the way back the early morning light and frost on the still harsh brown and grey winter landscape made for spectacular scenes. More Crested Larks, Goldfinches, Spotless Starlings and an Iberian Hare enlivened the route back.

After a late breakfast it was up to the town for picnic supplies. In the sky above the Griffon Vultures were now assembling as the warmer air now gave them some lift. Today we visited the area of pine forest and lagoons near Cantalejo. Our first sighting was a Red Squirrel risking all crossing the road as we entered the town of Cantalejo. Beyond the town in the pine woods we soon had to stop for a flock of Azure-winged Magpies up to 20 birds noisily flying amongst the trees and periodically down to the ground. At Laguna Navalayegua Teal, Mallard, Little Grebes and Coots were present. Many White Storks were active and Black Kites soared overhead. Coal Tits called from the pines and there were Serins, Black Redstarts and two Ravens. Further on we followed an interesting track through the wood to a spot overlooking the Rio Cega where we had our picnic. Moving on to Laguna Navahornos we walked to a hide overlooking a small amount of water (levels were low) with Little Grebe. The water was surrounded by reeds over which a Marsh Harrier hunted. There were more Black Redstarts, Serins and above Buzzard and Black Kite.

Returning to Sepulveda an evening walk by Marilyn and Dave produced more Red-billed Choughs and two Roe Deer. It was another evening being well looked after by our host Roberto. We had another excellent meal, again with vegetarian options and delicious local white wine.

Day 4

Monday 21st March

Fine, sunny and warm later

Sepulveda-Villafafila-Villanuevo de Valrojo

After an earlier breakfast we set off north-westwards for Cantalejo and Cuellar and cross country to Tordesillas where we picked up picnic supplies. Numerous Black and Red Kites Buzzards and two Hoopoes were seen en route. It was then on to Villapando and west to the extensive arable lands and lagoons at Villafafila. As we approached the area we took a wrong turn down a rough road which turned out to be beneficial as we soon spotted our first flock of more than 20 Great Bustards feeding in a field. We also were starting to see numerous Lesser Kestrels. Two bird species for which this vast open arable landscape is so important, some of it managed traditionally, specifically for these and other steppe species. After a good gaze at our Bustards we continued to Salina de Barrilos where there were numerous tree nesting White Storks. Not much was visible on the Laguna so we proceeded to Villafila where we admired two Great-spotted Cuckoos on a barn roof. After watching another group of Great Bustards we continued to the deserted village of Otero where we had lunch overlooking Salina Grande. Many hundreds of Shovelers were on the water with Teal, Gadwall, Mallard, Wigeon and Pochard. Waders included 50+ Avocets, Black-winged Stilts, Lapwings and a Green Sandpiper. Several Lesser Kestrels were active around the village, one of their strongholds in this important area for them. We were able to look at the construction of the old dovecote buildings and reconstructed ones with special roof nest boxes especially for the Kestrels.

Lunch done we continued our journey westwards towards Sierra de la Culebra. Highlights included a third group of Bustards, more Buzzards and more Black Kites. We reached our hotel, Posada El Tejar, in the village of Villanueva de Valrojo, which was to be our base for the next 4 nights, in time to settle in and have a bit of rest before heading off for our evening wolf watch. We set out at 6pm, stopping to watch a large flock of Linnets feeding in a freshly cultivated field at the edge of the village before travelling the few kilometres to the top of the hill overlooking the village Ferreras de Arriba. We looked at three traditional stone round buildings *corrala*, originally constructed to protect sheep from wolves and the weather, now sadly derelict. Several birds were busy in this open area between two blocks of pine woodland: a superb Black Redstart, many Goldfinch and Chaffinch feeding in the pines and a bright male Crossbill.

We then made our way to a forest track at the edge of woodland to a viewpoint overlooking a large area of heathland and fields and settled down to watch and wait. Soon we had found a group of Red Deer stags in the mid distance who looked pretty relaxed until a presumed forest ranger on a quad bike stopped to look at them, he soon went and they settled down again. We concentrated our search on an area below us near the edge of another block of woodland, the vegetation was quite high but after some time I had a fleeting glimpse of the rear end and tail of an animal that could only have been wolf. Then after some minutes I saw the whole animal just for a few seconds before it disappeared in the tall vegetation. After some more minutes Dave spotted it through his 'scope but unfortunately it disappeared again before he could get Marilyn onto it. We continued to watch until too dark to see but sadly it did not show itself again. We headed back for a welcome meal and our beds to get ready for an early start tomorrow.

Day 5

Tuesday 22nd March

Cold & frosty start, sunny with cloud later

Villanuevo de Valrojo-Cional-Santa Cruz de los Cuerragos

We were up and out at 6.30 so as to be in position at the same spot as last night. As it got light we had a view of a mosaic of heathland, fields, deciduous woods and pine plantations. Siskins were calling from the pinewood and a Dartford Warbler was active in the scrub in front of us. Crossbills flew over and a Cuckoo called. In the distance two Red Deer were grazing and another two were spotted closer, in the heather below us, young males feeding peacefully. We watched until 9am but sadly no Wolf activity today so we walked back to the car with a bit of circular diversion seeing some old Wolf tracks in the mud on the way. Back near the car many birds were active in a recently mulched young Sweet Chestnut plantation, feeding on the uncovered ground, Chaffinches and Goldfinches. In the pines nearby we had a good view of a Crested Tit. Back down the road we walked along the edge of the pinewood finding some old Wolf scat and some more footprints but nothing really fresh so we headed back for breakfast.

Out again at 11.30 we headed towards Boya to check out an alternative watching site for later, sadly the track had been rutted by timber hauling traffic and was not passable for our low clearance car, so this was going to be a walk in venue. We continued to Flechas another possible site and admired the old village at the head of a sheltered valley beautiful in the spring sunshine. Backtracking to Villardeciervos and on to Cional we had our picnic by the reservoir seeing a Swallow, Woodlark and the now frequent Black Kite. We continued to the old village of Santa Cruz close to the Portuguese border admiring a Southern Grey Shrike on the way. We walked through the village and down through the warm Sweet Chestnut grove, finding Common Primrose in bloom. Nuthatches were watched and back near the village a Bullfinch and two Rock Buntings were seen. In the village car park many Hoop Petticoat Narcissi were in bloom. On our return journey another Southern Grey Shrike near Linarejos and a particularly dark Buzzard were seen. Back at our hotel an Iberian Chiffchaff was singing from the nearby bushes. Out again for an evening watch at our usual spot, there were more Red Deer, three Roe and a Fox and Ravens but no Wolf this time.

Day 6

Wednesday 23rd March

Cloudy first thing, then Snow and Sleet, dryer later

Villanueva de Valrojo-Boya

We were out again early to our usual spot at the edge of the pinewood, overlooking Villanueva, but no Wolf activity seen. A couple of Red Deer and birds again included Siskin and Crossbills. After breakfast weather conditions deteriorated so the morning was spent at our hotel. By afternoon weather had improved so we walked in the neighbourhood of the village following tracks through areas of old walled gardens, birds here included Meadow Pipits, Short-toed Treecreepers and Mistle Thrushes. Continuing up over the heathland south towards the higher Sierra we had a secretive Dartford Warbler in an isolated bush, Stonechats and in pollarded Oak woodland a Stock Dove and Green Woodpecker. We found more Wolf scat and on our return saw and heard a singing Southern Grey Shrike. Back in the village Black Redstarts were active, a Cirl Bunting was singing and overhead were Black Kite and Buzzard.

Later we travelled to the viewpoint beyond Boya walking the last 2km or so on the by now very wet and muddy track to the viewpoint. Conditions were not good with rain and mist, we did however see a group of seven Wild Boar feeding under a Sweet Chestnut plantation. As it got too dark and misty to see we headed back to our hotel to dry out and then to dinner which included a very welcome lentil soup/stew.

Day 7

Thursday 24th March

A misty damp start a little brighter later

Villanueva de Valrojo-Villafafila-Boya

We had a leisurely breakfast at 8.30 today, before setting off for another look at Villafafila. At the Esla Valley we diverted through Bretocina where we crossed the wide river which had a couple of Little Egrets at its edge. There were strange entrances along the edge of the hillside overlooking the river; bodegas (wineries) we later learned. From Santovenia after negotiating a labyrinth of back streets we found an unpaved road heading for Villafafila, this led through rolling arable farmland with numerous Kites, Black and Red. Two pairs of Marsh Harriers were hunting and there was a fine male Hen Harrier. In a damp spot Lapwings were sitting on nests and a Green Sandpiper was feeding.

Many Lesser Kestrels were on the wing and a Hoopoe reluctant for us to overtake flew along the road ahead of us. Our first stop was at the interpretation centre for the reserve and we first walked around the lagoons. There were many Chiffchaffs in the Tamarisks bordering the water and numerous Hoopoes - probably a recent influx. In and around the lagoons were many Black-winged Stilts and Avocets a Redshank and numerous duck. Three re-habilitating Great Bustards in an enclosure gave us a closer view of this magnificent bird. Back at the centre we had a good look at the excellent exhibits and interpretation about the history and management of this important area and some of us frequented the shop for reserve t-shirts etc!

Moving on and up a couple of unpaved side tracks produced several groups of Great Bustards probably over 100 in total and some of these heavy spectacular birds in flight. After our picnic we started back, stopping at the stone bridge over the Rio Esla there were more Black Kites some gulls and looking south near rocky valley cliffs a Golden Eagle was watched for several minutes

We were out again at 6 to the watch point at Boya, weather was a bit kinder than last night with a bit of sun and clearer conditions. Red Deer and a group of Boar were seen again but no Wolf.

Day 8

Friday 25th March

Villanueva de Valrojo-Villafafila-Valladolid

We had a not too early start and a leisurely journey to the airport. From the Rio Esla crossing, a pair of Golden Eagles on the top of a distant tree were seen mating and more Great Bustards were seen as we passed through the Villafafila area towards Valladolid and the beginning of our journey home to the UK.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March							
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			10	2				
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2						
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>							2	
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>								2
5	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	10	6	20	✓	10	4	20	✓
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				12			✓	
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>				4				
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2	3	✓		1	✓	
9	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>				10			2	
10	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				200+				
11	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			30	✓				
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>							4	
13	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				10				
14	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			5	6	4	5	10+	✓
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	2	5	✓	2		8	1
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	30	300	50+	10				
17	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		2	1					
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			1	2			4	1
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>							2	
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1							
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	6		6	✓	4		8	✓
22	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>							1	2
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	1	✓	1		2	✓
24	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				20			30	✓
25	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1						
26	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	3		20+	5			3	
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>								
28	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		1						
29	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			20	✓			✓	
30	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				40			100+	✓
31	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				2			10	
32	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				✓			6	
33	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1			6			10	
34	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				3			1	
35	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				1			1	
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>							4	
37	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>							1	
38	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	2					2	
39	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>						1		
40	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	□
41	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		4	✓	✓	2		✓	
42	Great-spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>				2				
43	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>					H			
44	Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>	H							
45	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>							H	
46	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1		H	4			10	
47	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H	H			1		

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March							
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>		2	H		H	1		
49	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	4	4	5+		1			
50	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	2	□	□
51	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	10+	✓			1	
52	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		1						
53	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	2	1	2					
54	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>	H		2H					
55	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>								
57	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		10+	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	□
58	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		10+	1					
59	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				2		5		
60	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	4	2	2	1	3		
61	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					1	1		
62	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	H	H	H	H	H	
63	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	5	✓	2	✓	✓	4	□
64	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	6	20+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1		6	3+	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	3	✓	
67	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			H			H	2	
68	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓			2		1		
69	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1	H					
70	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		H			H			
71	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>						1		
72	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus iberica</i>					1			
73	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	2	1	3		4	20	
74	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		2						
75	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>					1			
76	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>		6	✓		1	✓	✓	
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		4	✓		1	✓	✓	
78	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			H		1	1		
79	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		4			1			
80	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1			
81	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1	H			2		
82	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					2	1		
83	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		1	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				2		1	1	
85	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>			20					
87	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		50+	✓					
88	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	5	1	2		H	
89	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	□
91	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	30	300	✓	✓				
92	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	□
93	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				1M	10			
94	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		5	✓					
95	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					1	1		
96	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		H	2			1		
97	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	□

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March							
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
98	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>					4			
99	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	100+	✓	✓	✓	□
100	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	1	2	4				3	
101	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	H					1	H	
102	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					2			

Mammals

1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>				1				
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>						7	5	
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				10	6	1	9	
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			2		3			
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					1			
6	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	1					1		
7	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>	2		1		1		1	
8	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			2					
9	Bat sp	<i>pipistrelle sp</i>	✓	✓						

Butterflies

1	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>			1		1			
2	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓	✓	✓					
3	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>					1			

Plants of note

1	A Gaglia	<i>Gagia arvensis</i>			✓					
2	Hoop Petticoat Narcissi	<i>Narcissus bulbocodium</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Common Primrose	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓

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