

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 23 November 2010



Bluethroat



Black-shouldered Kite



Red Fox



Common Cranes in flight

Report & images compiled by David Morris



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Day 1

Wednesday 17th November

Sunny and mild

Having boarded our morning flight from London, we arrived in sunny Madrid and made our way through the modern, maze-like airport building before picking up our mini bus and driving west. As daylight was rapidly closing in by late afternoon, we pulled off the main road to explore a small valley about 45km from our hotel. In the gently rolling dehesa, lit by the setting evening sun, we found Azure-winged Magpie, Corn Bunting, Crested Lark and Serin. A couple of obliging Wild Boar foraged by the roadside as Red and Fallow Deer grazed under the Holm Oaks. As the sun started to set, groups of Griffon Vultures started to descend from altitude to roost in nearby cliffs. Keen eyes within the group also spotted a huge Black Vulture within the Griffons as they flew around a nearby ridge. With the sun finally setting, we moved on to our comfortable hotel to enjoy a traditional meal and wine.

Day 2

Thursday 18th November

Sunny and mild, clouding over later

A bright and sunny morning greeted us on our first full day in Extremadura, so after breakfast we headed north en-route to Monfrague National Park. The journey took us through rolling dehesa which was full of winter bird life. Large parties of Azure-winged Magpies were evident as were the numerous Iberian Grey Shrike on the roadside wires. At one point we noticed a number of circling vultures as well as a few perched on nearby pylons. We pulled off the road and were treated to the sight of at least 30 Griffon Vultures and seven Black Vultures feeding on a carcass at close range. Our encounter gave us opportunity to observe the differences between the two species on the ground. We headed further north towards the national park, but took a slight detour into the dehesa to find one of the regions most charismatic birds. Sure enough, without fail we found them – two stunning adult Spanish Imperial Eagles perched on a pylon with three Griffon Vultures, showing their distinctive white shoulders. Both birds eventually took to the sky and circled around before gaining altitude and disappearing in a large, soaring vulture column.

We moved on to the Pennfalcon Rock at Monfrague. Vultures here did not disappoint with squadrons of Griffons coming in and out of the cliffs and flying above us. At one point a magnificent Golden Eagle joined them, dwarfed by the size of the massive Griffons. Blue Rock Thrushes were in the boulders and Rock Bunting called whilst Black Redstart flitted around below us. We enjoyed a picnic lunch below the castle before ascending the steps to give breath-taking views over the park with vultures flying at eye level.

As the afternoon progressed we explored further into the park seeing more flocks of Azure-winged Magpie, Sardinian Warbler, Chiffchaff, and Serin in the scrub and more vultures, as well as a Golden Eagle overhead. As the afternoon sun started to fade we started to head back to the hotel and were treated to the sight of a pair of foxes feeding on scraps at the side of the road. Completely unperturbed by our presence in the bus, many of us got superb photos of them in the evening light, which brought to a close an enjoyable day.

Day 3

Friday 19th November

Cool with sunshine and cloud and light showers later

A post-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds found Hawfinch, Azure-winged Magpie, Sardinian Warbler and plenty of singing Corn Buntings. After this we went south towards the fertile plains of Madrigalejo. We first headed for the dam at the Embalse de Sierra Brava to give us views over the large expanse of water. Huge rafts of thousands of wintering wildfowl were present at the lake, including Gadwall, Mallard, Wigeon, Pintail, Shoveler and Teal. In addition, Great Crested Grebe and coot were numerous, as were Greylag Geese with skeins of hundreds moving out to feed in the harvested rice paddies and maize fields. As we moved on around the lake, large flocks of Spanish Sparrows foraged in the adjacent fields along with Thekla and Crested Lark. Numerous Hoopoes and Iberian Grey Shrikes perched on the fencing along with large numbers of foraging Corn Buntings.

After crossing the dam we noticed a number of Griffon Vultures dropping into an adjacent field and as we approached we had fantastic views of the birds on the ground, allowing us to appreciate their size. As we moved away from the lake the bugling calls of cranes became apparent. We approached the recently harvested rice and maize fields and saw flocks of feeding cranes in every direction with hundreds at either side of the track we drove down. Lapwing, Cattle Egret and Green Sandpiper fed in the wetter areas as Hen and Marsh Harrier quartered the fields and a lone Merlin put in an appearance. We picnicked amongst the bird spectacle with large numbers of Waxbills, as well as Red Avadavat, Fan-tailed Warbler, Penduline Tit and Bluethroat in the reedy ditches. Further exploration of the rice fields revealed Great White Egret, White Stork, Black Stork and a pair stunning Black-shouldered Kites perching in a nearby tree. As we started to make our way back, large flocks of Spanish Sparrows and Waxbills buzzed across the road and great flocks of cranes took to the air, moving to roost at a nearby lake. The sheer spectacle made the day truly remarkable.

Day 4

Saturday 20th November

Rain over night, clearing by morning with a bright, cool and windy day

Today we awoke to low cloud and heavy rain as predicted by the forecast. We set off nevertheless en-route to Almaraz to explore the Embalse de Arrocampo. As we drove, the rain stopped and the cloud lifted to give a sunny, but cool start to the day, which continued as the theme for the day.

The overnight rain had brought snow to the Sierra de Gredos which provided a spectacular backdrop to our mornings birding far below the high snow-capped peaks. We explored the reserve at Arrocampo and almost immediately found a pair of obliging Purple Swamphens with a black fluffy chick. Penduline Tit and Cetti's Warbler called in the reeds, Marsh Harriers hunted over the wetlands as a Squacco Heron gave us a flyby showing its white wings. By late morning we moved on into the nearby mountains to enjoy a picnic in the sun within a spectacular, sheltered river valley. Black Vultures passed overhead and a small party of wintering Siskins fed in riverside Alders.

After a leisurely lunch we moved on to the nearby Belen Plain in order to get our first taste of the Extremadura steppe. Corn Bunting, Skylark, Stonechat, and Crested Lark were numerous. The occasional Black Vulture could be seen lingering on the ground waiting for a sheep to drop dead, and careful study of the feeding passerine flocks revealed Calandra Lark and stripy-headed Rock Sparrow. As the light was fading we were finally rewarded with some of our target species – a couple of flocks of Little Bustard and four superb Great Bustards that took flight as we passed before returning to the steppe grassland to feed again. All in all, an enjoyable day, and a taste of more steppe exploration to come...

Day 5

Sunday 21st November

Sunny and cool with showers late afternoon

Today we headed north to explore the areas of steppe to the north west of Trujillo near the village of Sta Marta de Magasca. As we passed through the Holm Oak dehesa, Azure-winged Magpies, Hoopoe and Iberian Grey Shrike were numerous.

As we got into the open steppe one member of the group quickly spotted a group of four magnificent Great Bustards adjacent to the road, giving us ample opportunity to observe the lovely rusty brown plumage before they took off, looking more out of place in flight than on the ground. We parked up and explored some of the steppe on foot, where Crested, Thekla and Skylark were all obvious, as were numerous Corn Buntings, Stonechats and wintering Lapwings. Eventually we managed to find a number of chunky Calandra Larks showing their contrasting dark under-wings and pale wing edges, and as we passed through the steppe these were highly numerous, with flocks of a couple of hundred. We paused at one point to overlook a small water hole and shallow valley and were rewarded by a small group of mixed Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse that dropped in on a nearby ridge, before allowing us to view them in the telescopes as they crept through the low cover. As we got back to the minibuses a group of Great Bustards gave us a flypast as they went to land in nearby fields.

Lunch was enjoyed in a valley by the Rio Almonte where we saw Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and Grey Wagtail as roving Griffon Vultures soared overhead. As we headed back towards Trujillo the steppe became fairly quiet due unfortunately to the presence of numerous hunters, but we did get a nice view of five Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a lone Golden Eagle hunting the plains.

Some of the group elected to visit the historic town of Trujillo late in the afternoon to see the castle and the magnificent Plaza Mayor with a grand statue of the conquistador Pizarro. The rest of the group went back for an exploration of the nearby Belen Plains. There we found large flocks of Calandra, Crested and Skylarks along with a nice pair of Hen Harriers and even more Lapwings, Corn Buntings and Spanish Sparrows.

Day 6

Monday 22nd November

Sunny and cool

On our final full day in Extremadura we decided to go south to revisit the wetlands and rice paddies around Zorita and Madrigalejo. Our route took us via an area of steppe near Campo Lugar where we found a group of eight Great Bustards and one keen eyed member of the group pointed out a flock of 14 Little Bustard in a roadside field, which allowed us to observe them well using our scopes and binoculars. As we headed into the rice fields north of Madrigalejo we soon started to observe vast flocks of cranes feeding along with numerous White Storks, Cattle Egrets and Lapwings. A number of Marsh Harriers hunted the wetlands and we found Great White Egret and Green Sandpipers in the drainage ditches. A search of an isolated patch of dehesa found a superb pair of Black-shouldered Kites, along with Waxbill and Red Avadavat in an adjacent reedy ditch. We decided to give a small scrubby patch of vegetation in a field corner a quick look over and were rewarded with two Bluethroats, the male of which was posed perfectly on a nearby fence.

As we headed towards the Sierra Brava reservoir we found Dartford Warbler in a patch of tamarisk and saw a number of Woodlarks as we ate our picnic in the rolling lakeside dehesa. A quick check on the water revealed thousands of wildfowl including Wigeon, Shoveler, Mallard, Gadwall, Teal and Pintail. Large numbers of Greylag Geese grazed the far shore, and three dainty Black-necked Grebes were spotted within the duck flock.

As the afternoon drew in we headed to the rice fields south of Madrigalejo observing Merlin and a Hen Harrier chasing a vast flock of Spanish Sparrows by the road. As we left, crossing an old bridge over the Rio Gargaligas, we found another Black-shouldered Kite, this time about 20m from us, and eating a vole on a telephone wire in the afternoon sun. We all had superb views, taking many photos and observing its dark red eyes. As the sun started to set in the west we walked around the rice fields in the pleasant evening ambience, getting excellent views of Red Avadavats and watching the awe inspiring spectacle of around 3,000 cranes circling around in the sky above with their bugling calls as they headed to roost. Our final day of exploring Extremadura was a memorable one, with happy faces all round, and we drove back to our cosy, rural hotel as the sunlight faded, before enjoying a traditional home-cooked meal with local wines and acorn liqueur to finish.

Day 7

Tuesday 23rd November

Sunny and cool

On our final morning we enjoyed our last breakfast before loading the vans and saying our goodbye's to our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. We arrived at Madrid airport in plenty of time before getting our British Airways flight back to the UK where we all said farewell at the baggage carousels before continuing our journeys back home.

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Species List

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	November							
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓				40+	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			2	1				
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>							3	
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		15+		3				
5	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				1				
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>			1				1	
7	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	6		100+	✓	3		50+	
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			20	3			3	
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	15	10	2		8	
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	30+		6				18	
11	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			3					
12	Greylag	<i>Anser anser</i>	10	10+	500				3000	
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	10			✓	
14	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			✓				✓	
15	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓				✓	
16	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓				1	
17	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			✓				9	
18	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			60				15	
19	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			2				3	
20	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	2	6	20+	15		10	
21	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	30	200+	40	20	20+		30	
22	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	1	15+	1	8	3			
23	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			3		3		2	
24	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			10	8			8	
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2						
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		2	8	6	4		10	
27	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		2			2			
28	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca (adalberti)</i>		2						
29	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	8		6	10	4		✓	
30	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1		1		1	
31	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2		8	4		1	
32	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H			
33	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1	3			4	
34	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓	10			✓	
35	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				4				
36	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		H	3000+				10000+	
37	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				48			14	
38	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				4	12		8	
39	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					1			
40	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
41	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				1				
42	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			H					
43	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							1	
44	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2	12		1		9	
45	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1				
46	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		30	✓	10	2		✓	
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓				10	

	Common name	Scientific name	November						
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23
48	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					7		
49	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>					3		
50	Feral/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1			4		
52	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			10		✓	✓	
53	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				1			
54	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1	1	1			
55	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3	25+	10	30+	15	
56	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		H				6	
57	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			2	✓	✓	15	
58	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	10	30+	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			3		3		
60	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				6	5000	150+	
61	Crag Martin	<i>Hirundoe rupestris</i>		✓	40	10	8		
62	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2		1	2	3	
65	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				2	1		
66	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	10	3	6	✓	
67	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		15	6	2	1		
68	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			2			2	
69	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		6					
71	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	3	3	4	
72	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1					
73	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	3				
74	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		3	6				
75	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			30+			15+	
76	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			5H	3H		2	
77	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>						2	
78	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	2	6	15	2	2	3	
79	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		2	8	3	6	3	
80	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	30	✓	✓	✓	
81	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		1	1	
82	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	1	✓	✓	
83	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓					
84	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			H	H		H	
85	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		6	20+	15	20+	15	
86	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>				30			
87	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
88	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		4	2				
90	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	20	✓	✓	✓	
91	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>		100+	6	30	60+	35	
92	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	8	20+	6	3	
93	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>						1	
94	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			2000	200	✓	✓	
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
96	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				8		15	
97	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		2	1				

	Common name	Scientific name	November							
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
99	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		6				30		
100	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		H		20				
101	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			10					
102	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
103	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		6	2			25	✓	
104	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		2		1				
105	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓	✓	200+	400+	✓	✓		
106	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			6					
107	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			20				30	
108	Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			300+				6	

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