

Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 17th November 2022

Report by Niki Williamson



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Tour participants: Niki Williamson and Philip Thompson (Leaders) with ten Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This brilliant week's birding in Spain's Extremadura took place under glorious blue skies throughout, and was about both quantity AND quality!

The plains were alive with huge quantities of Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and yielded many sightings of both Little and Great Bustards accompanied by a constant soundtrack of Calandra, Thekla and Crested Lark, Corn Bunting and Eurasian Skylark. The group enjoyed thousands of Common Cranes coming into roost on rice fields in the late afternoon sun. Hundreds of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures gathering on thermals as they left Monfragüe National Park to cruise the plains.

Moments of sheer quality included breath-taking views of Spanish Imperial Eagle – an adult and juvenile together – two Bonelli's Eagle, Blue Rock Thrush, sprinklings of Red Avadavat and Common Waxbills amongst thousands of House and Spanish sparrows, and the seemingly ever-present Eurasian Hoopoes! And of course, watching the heaviest flying bird on the wing in soft winter sunshine is definitely a sight worth seeing.

Day 1

Thursday 11th November

The group assembled at Madrid airport from various afternoon flights and were met by Spanish resident leader Niki. She and Philip drove the group west into the sunset towards Extremadura, picking out Common Cranes, White Storks, Common Buzzards and Red Kites on the way before darkness fell.

We were all glad to see the comforting lights of our accommodation at Casa Rural Las Canteras sparkling in the middle of the pitch-dark plains!

We got a warm welcome from our hosts Paco and Pilar and we were soon settled in, enjoying a glass of wine and a three-course meal in front of an open fire - finished off by a delicious cake for birthday boy Tim.

Day 2

Friday 12th November

After yesterday's late arrival today we enjoyed a leisurely start – no need to head out early when all the treasures of the Extremadura Plains lie just minutes from our accommodation! We spent some time simply viewing out from Las Canteras, picking out two lovely Eurasian Hoopoes, Thekla's Larks singing, many Spotless Starlings, and Common Cranes flying over.

Heading out onto the plains around Monroy, we got our first close views of an Iberian Grey Shrike perched up next to the road. The plains were alive with song, including Northern Lapwings, Eurasian Skylarks, Corn Buntings and many buzzing Calandra Larks. A Merlin zipped through, causing chaos amongst the other avian plains-dwellers!

Closer inspection of some movement in the longer vegetation revealed our first fifteen Little Bustards of the trip! We also got great views of a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse wheeling around the fields, and Black-bellied Sandgrouse could be heard as well.

After a coffee in Trujillo, we headed out to explore another section of plains around Belén, after our first picnic lunch at the pleasantly neglected park in Torrecillas. Here we enjoyed many wintering Common Chiffchaffs and further good views of Iberian Grey Shrike.

On the plains we enjoyed views of around 200 Griffon Vultures and 20 Cinereous Vultures seemingly coming in to a carcass just out of view, accompanied by many Red Kites. Black Redstarts showed well and a Peregrine Falcon swooped by. We were admiring a Little Owl perched on a wall when another group of fifteen Little Bustards flew in and landed right in front of us! They disturbed a single Stone Curlew!

A great first day on the plains topped off by a hearty meal from Pilar's traditional kitchen.

Day 3

Saturday 13th November

This morning we headed to the reservoir of Alcollarín, a great spot for wintering wildfowl.

Among many hundreds of Shovelers, Common Coot and Great Crested and Little Grebe we picked out Black-necked Grebe, Northern Pintail, Ruddy Shelduck, Eurasian Teal, and Wigeon, and a flock of around 150 Egyptian Geese. Great and Little Egrets dotted the shoreline and we saw Black-tailed Godwits. Along the shoreline we picked up a gorgeous Common Kingfisher, Dartford Warbler, Thekla's Larks and our first good views of Iberian Magpies.

A spectacular juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle appeared out of the blue and gave us amazing views, and two Bonelli's Eagles surveyed us from the treetops.

During picnic in a woodland glade, we were surrounded by Siskins and Chaffinches, and we found an interesting Viperine Snake.

Pausing for coffee at a roadside café, we were amazed to spot six Great Bustards wandering around in a nearby field!

As the afternoon wore on, we headed to explore the rice fields around Pozuelo and Fernando V. Along the ditches and fields were thousands of House and Spanish Sparrows, with a sprinkling of Rock Petronias, Corn Buntings, Red Avadavats, Common Waxbill and Tree Sparrows. Flocks of hundreds of Iberian Magpies moved through the fruit orchards. Flooded fields hosted Black-winged Stilts, Spotted and Common Redshank, Glossy Ibis, Common and Green Sandpipers.

The late afternoon was simply spectacular, watching thousands of Common Cranes coming in to feed on the stubbles pre-roost, with soft golden light from the setting sun and their soft, bugling calls filling the air.

Day 4

Sunday 14th November

Today it was time to explore more of the area's steppe habitat, and we headed to the area around Santa Marta. Our first stop gave us a great opportunity to get to grips with Thekla's Lark identification, and we also enjoyed Iberian Magpies and Iberian Grey Shrikes.

Further on we enjoyed a large flock of Little Bustards in flight over our heads for around twenty minutes before they finally landed! There were also lovely prolonged views of Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight, some of which landed close enough to get great plumage detail in our telescopes. A juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle preened on a nearby rock while an adult looked on from its tree perch.

After a coffee in the village of Santa Marta, with Crag Martins overhead, we headed to our lunch by the River Tamuja. In this picturesque, secluded little valley we tucked in to local olives and cheeses and bread from the best bakery in Trujillo! Along the river were Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Siskin and Iberian Pond Tortoise. An adult and a juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle soared over our heads, presumably having finished their preening and perching!

Moving on to the Llanos de Cáceres – a protected area forming part of the Natura 2000 designated network. We enjoyed watching Griffon and Cinereous Vultures being held off a carcass by a large sheepdog, Red Kites and Ravens looking on.

As ever the whole area was rich with larks, finches, buntings and pipits, and there were many Little Owls, Eurasian Hoopoes and Iberian Grey Shrikes.

But there was one star bird so far notably absent from the day... Moving on to our last stop we finally found it! Seventy Great Bustards were all together in a single field! There was a mixture of males and females and some of the males were showing the beginnings of their famous "foam-bath" display. It was a brilliant sight, but seeing them all together in a fenced field led us to joke that this was in fact the Bernard Matthews Bustard Farm!

Heading home after a successful day we went for a sunset walk to listen out for Eurasian Stone Curlews. We heard two, interrupted by Little Owls. Our host Paco gave us a brilliant astronomy lesson before dinner, and we could see the rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter through our scopes. Pilar's hearty bread-thickened tomato soup with garlic and paprika was the perfect end to the day.

Day 5

Monday 15th November

Yet another cloudless sunny day greeted us as we headed out to Monfragüe National Park, arguably the jewel in Extremadura's natural crown.

After a brief stop in the village of Torrejón for fresh bread and fuel, we headed up to the Castillo, crossing the path of a quiet herd of Red Deer on the way. We enjoyed Black Redstarts and Short-toed Treecreepers in the woodlands, and spectacular views out across the area and the start of the Gredos Mountains.

At the impressive crags of the Peña Falcon, we spent the morning with brilliant views of hundreds of Griffon

and Cinereous Vultures, some perched really close. As the air warmed, we watched as they took to the thermals and soared above us, before heading off to the surrounding plains, joined by Marsh Harrier and Eurasian Sparrowhawk. Many Crag Martins swooped and we had great views of Blue Rock Thrush.

Stopping for coffee in Villareal, Serins and Siskins fed alongside the café with Common Linnets and Goldfinches. At our picnic at the Mirador del Tadjadilla, more vultures soared overhead, perhaps eyeing up the exceptionally tasty Torta de Casar cheese we were tucking into! Moving on through an area of coniferous forest, we saw more Red Deer as well as Firecrest, Coal Tit, Crested Tit and Brambling amongst the Chaffinches and Siskins.

At our final stop by the strange geological formations of Portilla del Tietar, we saw Common Kingfisher and two gorgeous male Blue Rock Thrushes as Griffon Vultures began coming into roost, alongside almost 150 Great Cormorants! Bellowing Red Deer provided an eerily beautiful soundtrack.

We ended the day as it began, at the beautiful Peña Falcón, with evening light illuminating the hordes of vultures as they came in to roost. Then it was back for a celebratory beer and Pilar's traditional *tortilla de patatas*, which she has been preparing most of the afternoon.

Day 6

Tuesday 16th November

Today we headed for Campo Lugar, our last unexplored section of plains. The action started immediately with a perched Peregrine Falcon and a flurry of larks and pipits disturbed by a Merlin! As well as flocks of airborne Golden Plovers, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, we had absolutely outstanding views of close Black-bellied Sandgrouse in a nearby field. We felt lucky to have the chance to appreciate that gorgeous plumage! We also took a moment to appreciate how many Calandra Larks were singing around us.

At the next stop, a solitary Great Bustard was spotted! We were so intent on admiring it, we came close to missing the group that flew right over our heads! Amazing views of the world's heaviest flying bird, looking surprisingly graceful in the bright winter sunshine. Again, we were impressed by large groups of dozens of Griffon Vultures gathering overhead and a flock of 21 Little Bustards in flight, accompanied by a single Feral Pigeon!

We paused at some picturesque pools where Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Little Grebe and Great and Little Egrets were gathered. Also briefly seen were Serins and Rock Petronia.

After a relaxing lunch back at base and chance for folk to do some packing and get assistance with Covid admin for their inbound flight, we headed into the historic town of Trujillo. This magnificently-preserved medieval centre and Moorish fort holds layers of human history. It's also great for a spot of "urban birding"!

We began at the picturesque pools of San Lázaro, enjoying Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plover, Spanish Sparrow and Grey Wagtail.

Then it was on to the main square in the Old Town, from where we walked through the cobbled streets to the castle at the top of town, past Crag Marting roosting on the buildings. From this superb vantage point, from

where people have looked out over the plains of Extremadura for many centuries, we watched thousands upon thousands of Spotless Starlings stream in from the plains to roost in the trees and on the rooftops, filling the air with noise.

Day 7

Wednesday 17th November

All too soon it was time to head home from beautiful Extremadura, and we said goodbye to our lovely hosts Paco, Pilar and Chulo the dog!

On the way to the airport, we had time for one last stop at Arrocampo reservoir, whose reed-fringed edges and slightly warmer waters attract much aquatic life. Our trip was capped off with satisfying views of Squacco Heron, Western Swamphen, Penduline Tit, Marsh Harrier, Spanish Sparrow and a Eurasian Wryneck!

During our drive back to Madrid, Red Kites, Griffon and Cinereous Vultures and Common Cranes were our constant companions, and we managed to clock a small flock of Monk Parakeets at our roadside lunch stop.

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Checklist

Mammals & other

Common name	Scientific name	Date:						
		11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		1		4			
Rabbit	<i>Orytolagus cuniculus</i>	✓			✓			
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>					10		
Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>			1				
Soprano Pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Free-tailed Bat	<i>Tadarida teniotis</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>					✓		
Viperine Snake	<i>Natrix maura</i>			1				
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>							
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>							
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>							
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>							
Southern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>							
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>							
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>							
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>							
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>							
African Grass Blue	<i>Zizeeria knysna</i>							
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>							
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympatrum fonscolombii</i>							
Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda caerulea</i>							

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						1	
2	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>			2				
3	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>			100+				
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓				
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓			1	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2	✓		✓	✓	
7	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓	1		✓	
8	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓				
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓	✓		✓	
10	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	1	5	1	
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1	✓			✓	
12	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓				
13	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			3				
14	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	6		✓				
15	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			1				
16	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>							4

			Date:						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
17	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>							1
18	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓		✓		
19	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	1	12	✓	✓
20	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			10+			1	
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓	3		✓	
22	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		148	20	✓
23	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		200	✓	50	300 +	200+	✓
24	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		20	✓	10	20+	✓	✓
25	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			1	2		1	
26	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>			2				
27	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1	1	1		
28	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		4	✓	6	1	2	✓
29	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2	1	1			
30	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	✓	10+	10+	✓	✓
32	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>			6	70		C.20	
33	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		30		42		21	
34	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			2				1
35	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>							1
36	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						✓	✓
37	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓			✓	✓
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	12	40+	2000 +	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedecnemus</i>		1		2	2	1	
40	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			50			2	
41	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓		6	
43	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				1		10	
44	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				3			
45	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			12				
46	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>			1				
47	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			9				
48	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			4				
49	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1	✓				
50	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1	1	1		
51	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
52	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		1					
53	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓						✓
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>							✓
55	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		50+		200 +			
56	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		✓		50		4	
57	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2	2	10+	✓	✓	✓
61	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			4	1	1		1
62	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		10+	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					2		

			Date:						
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
64	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>							1
65	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1				2	
67	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				1	
68	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		20+	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					1		
70	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		6	200	24	✓	✓	
71	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	2	✓	2	✓	
74	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					3		
75	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					1		
76	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			1	1	✓		
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	1	1	✓		
78	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>							4
79	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓			
80	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	1		
82	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓		✓		✓	
83	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>							✓
84	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		5	✓	6	✓	✓	
85	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>							✓
86	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			6			1	
87	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			6		20		
88	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2	✓	2		1	✓
90	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2		6		✓
91	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1	1			1	
92	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					1		
94	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					2		
95	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			1		1		
96	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					6		
97	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			1	2			
98	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2000 +	
99	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
100	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
101	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>					✓		
102	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
103	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					6		
105	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
106	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
108	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			10				
109	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			6	2		1	
110	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓				
111	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			✓				
112	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1		1	4	
113	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

			Date:						
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
114	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
116	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					1		
117	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					3		
118	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	✓		1	1	
119	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
120	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
121	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		6	✓		✓	8	
122	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓	3	✓		
123	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
124	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					1		
125	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		1					