Spain – Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th - 18th February 2022



Blue Rock Thrush by Peter Hickson



Great Spotted Cuckoo by Chris Northwood



Great Bustards by Peter Hickson



Griffon Vulture by Chris Northwood

Tour report by Niki Williamson



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Summary

A trip to Extremadura in Winter is always a beautiful thing, and this one was no exception!

Calandra, Thekla's, Crested and Skylark, Corn Bunting, Zitting Cisticola and Eurasian Stone-curlew provided the soundtrack to some great days of plains exploration. Specialities showed well, with a major highlight of the trip being the huge flocks of both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse swirling before us! Great Bustards appeared to us both individually and as herds of 20-odd birds together!

Views of Griffon, Cinereous (Eurasian Black) and Egyptian Vultures were breath-takingly close, both on carcasses on the plains and soaring around the cliffs of Monfragüe National Park. Golden, Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagles were delightful too!

In a week full of stunning moments, gems like Great Spotted Cuckoo, Black Stork, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Bluethroat shone out for many. And as well as the warming sun, we had our hosts Paco and Pilar's delicious traditional Extremaduran food to warm us through!

Day 1

Saturday 12th February

Niki met Simon and the group at Madrid airport and we were soon loaded into minibuses and on our way west across Castilla-la-Mancha region, glimpsing Red Kites, White Storks, Griffon Vultures and Cattle Egrets as we drove. We could see Common Cranes grazing on Holm Oak acorns in the *dehesa* pasturelands. We made a stop at a service station where we enjoyed a coffee and our first Crested Larks and Black Redstarts!

We arrived at our base for the week at Las Canteras as darkness was falling, and were welcomed by White Storks on their rooftop nests, and also by our hosts Pilar and her son Paco, who settled us into our rooms. Although very cosy by the log burner in the accommodation's conservatory area, some ventured outside and were rewarded with a dusk chorus of Eurasian Stone-curlew and Little Owl!

Day 2

Sunday 13th February

We used our first, rather chilly and overcast morning to explore some of the excellent sections of steppe habitat close to our accommodation. After a stop to pick up fresh bread from the best bakery in Trujillo, we headed out to the plains of Belén area.

Here we picked up our first Eurasian Hoopoe and Iberian Grey shrike as well as enjoying an introduction to the varied and vocal farmland bird assemblage here, including Corn Buntings, Zitting Cisticolas, Skylark, and Crested and Calandra Larks. But the stars of the show today were undoubtedly the vultures - they were numerous, strewn about the plains on rocks, in trees and on the ground, usually loitering near flocks of livestock in the hope of some carrion. We got absolutely superb views of hulking Eurasian Griffon and Cinereous (also known as Eurasian Black) Vultures. There were even two Egyptian Vultures, presumably from the area's small overwintering population. Red Kites and Common Buzzards added to the raptor melée.

We headed back to the cosiness of Las Canteras for our first picnic lunch, complete with hot soup! While we ate, we were treated to an aria from a Stripeless Tree Frog, who had taken up residence in the conservatory.

As we headed back out to the vans, three Golden Eagles drifted over! We took this as our cue to head to our next section of plains, just up the road towards Monroy. Our first stop allowed us views of flocks of Common Cranes drifting over and some lovely close Serins in the Holm Oak trees. There were Griffon and Black Vultures around us again, so we moved on to the higher section of plain. Here we got our best views yet as they were resting right next to the road! We were able to view them using the vans as mobile hides and get some more fabulous photos. We soon caught up with one of the earlier Golden Eagles, which was causing havoc amongst the smaller birds! This uproar gave us absolutely outstanding prolonged views of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, which swirled around us in a flock numbering in the hundreds. Superb!

Day 3

Monday 14th February

Today the sun came out for real, and the assembled nesting White Storks certainly seemed to be celebrating Valentine's Day with *gusto*!

We headed out to the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca to look for more steppe specialities. A brief stop at a roadside spot gave us a good opportunity to compare Crested and Thekla's Larks, which occur together here. There were also Iberian Magpies and Iberian Grey Shrikes to admire, and large flocks of Spanish Sparrows.

Moving on, we found a cacophony of farmland birds once more, with Calandra Larks showing particularly well close to the track amongst Eurasian Skylarks and Corn Buntings. Northern Lapwing and Golden Plover filled the fields. Suddenly there was a group of six Little Bustards in flight! Frustratingly they disappeared just over a ridge and out of reach. Later another group did exactly the same, but this time more people glimpsed them before they went from view.

Two gorgeous Spanish Imperial Eagles were active around a local nest site, giving fantastic flight views of our third Iberian endemic of the trip! We hit another large group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and today we also encountered Black-bellied Sandgrouse, both in flight and on the ground, on the right side of the hill!

But it was as we were leaving for a coffee break that our Bustard luck changed! A solitary male Great Bustard was stalking across a hilltop in a stately fashion and we got brilliant views!

After a well-earned coffee break in the charming village square of Santa Marta, we headed for lunch at the Río Tamuja. We viewed down this lovely picturesque, wooded river valley and picked up Common Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail while we tucked into our spread of local olives, salads, cheeses, Iberian hams – and of course wine and chocolate!

Heading onwards we spent the afternoon on the Llanos de Cáceres, a protected Special Bird Area, where we were greeted by another pair of Great Bustards almost as soon as we arrived! A Little Owl peering out of a nestbox charmed the group and we got nice views of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse on the deck. Then, at our very last stop of the day, we hit the Great Bustard jackpot! A flock of over 20 individuals were hanging out together right

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next to the road! We delighted in spending time watching and photographing these huge but strangely elegant birds from a respectful distance.

Day 4

Tuesday 15th February

Another glorious day awaited our trip to Monfragüe National Park – arguable the scenic jewel in Extremadura's crown. As planned, we arrived to the spectacular cliffs at Peña Falcon just as the air was warming. This area hosts the park's largest Griffon Vulture colony, numbering in the hundreds of pairs. We could see them waiting on the crags for the air to warm. Then, as the thermals began to rise, first dozens, then more and more of these huge birds rose up in transcendental spirals and heading out to the plains to forage. Just spectacular!

As well as the soaring birds, many remained on nests, and were clearly already incubating eggs. Amongst the throng of local Griffons we also saw two Egyptian Vultures, Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Golden Eagle and scores of Crag Martins interspersed with Barn Swallows and House Martins.

Blue Rock Thrush shone out from the rocks as did Rock Bunting and Cirl Bunting. We also had really good views of Hawfinch, a species that would seemingly accompany us all day.

Pausing for coffee at the restored mountain village of Villareal de San Carlos, we enjoyed more Hawfinch and Serin, Black Redstart and some charming nesting Barn Swallows.

Lunch at Mirador de Tajadilla featured a spectacular fly-past by a stunning adult Bonelli's Eagle! It also featured our Cheese of the Week – the award-winning and extremely memorable Torta de Casar. This aged sheep's cheese is soft, tangy and a fantastic accompaniment to any passing eagle!

We next explored an area of coniferous forest which yielded Hawfinches, Coal Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker and some intensely pursued and rightfully won views of Short-toed Treecreeper. A Bonelli's Eagle soared over us once again.

At our final stop of the day at Portilla del Tietar, we enjoyed the complete tranquillity of the surroundings, the fascinating crumpled rock formations and the day's best views of Blue Rock Thrush. The day ended with a mirror image of the morning as vultures returned from the plains. We were surrounded by their prehistoric-sounding calls and the rush of their wings as they came in to roost.

Day 5

Wednesday 16th February

Today we headed out to the Embalse de Alcollarín, one of the area's reservoirs and a popular site for wintering wildfowl as well as species of pastureland.

We found a great selection, with Egyptian Geese, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Teal among the many hundreds of wintering Northern Shoveler. A handful of Black-necked Grebes swam alongside their Little and Great Crested counterparts. Eurasian Spoonbills and Great Egrets stalked the water's edge and we picked up a magnificent wintering Black Stork coming in to land.

In the surrounding pastures, we enjoyed a blizzard of Iberian Magpies and some vocal Dartford Warblers as well as Woodlarks in song flight. A highlight for sure was the extraordinary view of a Bonelli's Eagle right overhead.

We had picnic among a grove of Holm Oaks with views of Marsh Harriers hunting nearby, before heading for a coffee break in the nearby town of Zorita.

The afternoon was spent in the rice fields of Fernando V and Vegas Altas, a famed haunt of wintering Common Cranes. Many had already headed north to breeding grounds in France and Germany, but although numbers were lower than we had hoped, we still got some great views and photos of several family groups of these elegant birds.

The reed-fringed ditches were alive with farmland birds and among enormous flocks of Spanish Sparrows we encountered a bunch of Common Waxbills and a glimpsed Red Avadavat. From another ditch came a song which had us foxed for a moment, until we realised it was coming from a Red-billed Leiothrix – another one of the area's introduced species.

At this time of year, birdlife often concentrates into a handful of fields which can take a little searching for! Today was no exception, but we soon found favoured fields which held all manner of waders, including Bartailed Godwits, Ruff, Black-winged Stilts, Glossy Ibis, Common Snipe, Eurasian Curlew, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Green Sandpipers and more! A particularly welcome addition was a stunning Bluethroat, showing well in a muddy field.

Soon it was time to head back for another one of Pilar's hearty traditional meals by the log burner – tonight the menu featured her famed tomato soup, thickened with thinly sliced Trujillo bread, which takes days to prepare! Well worth the wait!

Day 6

Thursday 17th February

For our last full day, we began by exploring another section of the area's fine steppe habitat, up at the plains of Campo Lugar. Despite the sudden appearance of some thick mist – perhaps to remind the group of our imminent return to the UK - we enjoyed lark and bunting song all around us, and some lovely views of ghostly Marsh and Hen Harriers, juxtaposed in the mist. Heading off the beaten track a little we also came across a group of Great Bustards!

We headed off to warm up with a coffee, and those who were brave enough to drink it outside were rewarded with views of another stunning male Hen Harrier.

As we headed back for lunch at Las Canteras, the sun broke through and we were thrilled to spot a Great Spotted Cuckoo in a roadside tree! We carefully snuck from the vans and got absolutely crippling views of this and another nearby individual, calling to each other and showing well in nearby shrubs. The bird of the day for most!

After lunch we ended our day with a trip into historic Trujillo, but not before visiting a small park at the edge of town and adding great views of Little Ringed Plovers to our day!

In the old town, we enjoyed wandering the medieval streets and visiting the impressive Moorish castle at the top of the settlement. We watched White Storks - newly returned and repairing their nests - and Crag Martins coming in to roost on the carved masonry of the magnificent main square.

We celebrated our trip and our last night as always with a delicious meal by Pilar, and a chance to sample the local acorn liqueur!

Day 7

Friday 18th February

Sadly, our trip to Extremadura in winter was almost at an end, and we said goodbye to Paco, Pilar Chulo the dog and their impressive array of White Storks!

On the way there was time for one last stop at Arrocampo reservoir, a reed-fringed lagoon which provides cooling for the nearby nuclear power station. The morning mist lifted just enough for us to enjoy views of Black-crowned Night Herons, Western Swamphen, and some very cute Penduline Tits!

Then it was time to head to Madrid to catch their flights, with some great memories and photos of the trip!

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Checklist

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name		February 2022								
	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18		
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor						✓			
Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiacus				2	✓				
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			✓		2500	✓			
Gadwall	Mareca strepera					✓				
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope					✓				
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta						10			
Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca			2		✓				
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa	3	✓	2	✓	✓	✓			
Great Bustard	Otis tarda			24		2	6			
Little Bustard	Tetrax tetrax			12						
Great Spotted Cuckoo	Clamator glandarius						3			
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Pterocles alchata		200+	100			√			
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Pterocles orientalis			20+						
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	Columba livia	√	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	/		
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	/	/	√	✓	✓	√	✓		
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus							1		
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus			1		✓	√	· ·		
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		1			· ·	100	· /		
Western Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio		1			,	100	3		
Common Crane	Grus grus	-	_		20+	√	✓	20+		
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	<u> </u>	, , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , , ,		207	→	→	201		
Great Crested Grebe						✓	✓			
Black-necked Grebe	Podiceps cristatus					V ✓	V			
	Podiceps nigricollis Burhinus oedicnemus	4+		4	4	√	4			
Eurasian Stone-curlew		4+		1	4		1	✓		
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	 	✓			53 ✓	5 	∨ ✓		
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus		+	√	√	V				
European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria		200+	✓			_	-		
Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius						1	-		
Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata					2				
Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica					12				
Ruff	Calidris pugnax					51		<u> </u>		
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago		2		1	√		√		
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos				4		✓			
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus				1	√		-		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus					1		-		
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia					2+		<u> </u>		
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		√	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis					✓		✓		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus			✓		✓	✓			
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra					1				
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	✓	27+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓	3	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia					8				
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax							10		
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓				✓	✓	✓		

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		February 2022								
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			2	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Great Egret	Ardea alba					2				
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta					\checkmark		✓		
Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus	1	1							
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		2		2					
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	2	100+	✓	200+	4	✓	✓		
Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus		20+	✓	50+		✓	✓		
Spanish Imperial Eagle	Aquila adalberti			2						
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos		3		3					
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata				2	1				
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	✓	✓	2		10	1	✓		
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus		2	1		1	2			
Red Kite	Milvus milvus	√	<u>∠</u> ✓	· /	1		<u>∠</u>	✓		
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	· /	· ·	·	· /		· ·			
Little Owl	Athene noctua	· /	1	1	· /	<u> </u>	✓			
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		10+	<u> </u>	✓		✓			
	 		10+		V		V			
Crost Spotted Woodpaster	Alcedo atthis			1		2		3		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major				1		_			
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni						3			
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	√	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		1		1					
Monk Parakeet	Myiopsitta monachus	4						✓		
Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis		4	√	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius				6					
Iberian Magpie	Cyanopica cooki		1	26	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Northern Raven	Corvus corax	✓	✓	8	4		2			
Coal Tit	Periparus ater				1					
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		1		✓					
Great Tit	Parus major			1	✓	✓				
Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus							4+		
Woodlark	Lullula arborea		✓			2				
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		✓	100+		1	✓	✓		
Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae			✓	✓		✓	✓		
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	√	✓	✓	✓	√	✓	_		
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		50	✓			/	✓		
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris			20+	✓	√	/	_		
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√	✓		✓	√	√	✓		
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		· ·	· ✓	·	<u>·</u> ✓	· ✓			
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		, ,	•	2	•	•	_ •		
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			1		✓		_		
	i e			I	✓	✓		_ '		
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus				 		/	,		
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita	√	1	2	✓	√	√	√		
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		1	3		√	√	✓		
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			1	✓	√		√		
Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala	1	1	✓	✓	√	√	✓		
Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata					2				
Red-billed Leoithrix	Leiothrix lutea					2				
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes							1		

			February 2022								
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18			
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris			1							
Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos				✓	✓					
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus			1	✓						
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		1		✓						
Bluethroat	Luscinia svecica					1					
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius				7						
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia				2						
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		✓			✓	✓	✓			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Common Waxbill	Estrilda astrild					✓					
Red Avadavat	Amandava amandava					1					
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea			1			1				
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba alba	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes			1	✓						
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
European Serin	Serinus serinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia				1						
Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus				1						

Others

Common name	Scientific name	February 2022							
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Mammals									
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes		1						
Badger	Meles meles			RIP					
Iberian Hare	Lepus granatensis			1					
Rabbit	Orytolagus cuniculus	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	✓			10	2			
Wild Boar	Sus scrofa			5					
European Free-tailed Bat	Tadarida teniotis		1				✓		
Pipistrelle spp	Pipistrellus spp	✓					√		
Reptiles & Amphibians									
Iberian Wall Lizard	Podarcis hispanicus						✓		
Red-eared Slider	Trachemys scripta elegans						✓		
Stripeless Tree Frog	Hyla meridionalis		1	1					
Butterflies & moths									
Green-striped White	Euchloe belemia			✓					
Small White	Pieris rapae		1			✓			

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Common name	Scientific name	February 2022								
		12	13	14	15	16	17	18		
Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea			✓						
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta					✓				
Small Heath	Coenonympha pamphilus					✓				
Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas			✓						
Swallowtail	Papilio machaon			✓						
Large Tortoiseshell	Nymphalis polychloros					✓				
Holly Blue	Celastrina argiolus				✓					
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria				✓					
Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera				✓					
Red and Gold (moth)					✓					
Hummingbird Hawk-moth	Macroglossum stellatarum						✓			



Sunrise on the plains by Niki Williamson