

Spain – Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 18th November 2022

Tour report by Niki Williamson



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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Black and Griffon Vulture, hundreds of wintering Common Cranes – the iconic Extremeñan avian highlights just kept coming on this week-long exploration of the plains, mountains and wetlands of one of Spain's best birding regions.

A strong supporting cast featured Black-winged Kite, Thekla's, Calandra, Crested and Skylark, Spanish Sparrow and Iberian Grey Shrikes on the plains and Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting among the impressive crags. And on the reservoirs and rice fields, Black-necked Grebes, Little Stint, Black-winged Stilt, Common Waxbill and Red Avadavat.

All this against a backdrop of stunning scenery, picnics featuring delicious local produce and traditional home-cooked food from our host Pilar.

Day 1

Saturday 12th November

Simon and Niki met the group from Madrid airport and we headed west, admiring the distant Gredos Mountains to our right as we drove. A hovering Black-winged Kite prompted a comfort-and-birding stop at a motorway services, where we picked up Black Redstarts, Crested Lark and flocks of Spanish Sparrows.

We arrived at our base at Casa Rural Las Canteras, beautifully situated out on the plains of Extremadura, where we were welcomed by our host Paco, and our chef, his mother Pilar. As the sun set, we scanned out over the landscape and picked out a Red Fox and an Egyptian Mongoose – not a bad start!

Day 2

Sunday 13th November

Today we headed straight for the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca – one of the areas most renowned areas of steppe habitat. Stopping at the end of a farm track, we immediately could hear both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight! They are birds that fly fast and hide well on the ground, but we eventually got views of both species, both flying and landed. Thekla's and Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings provided an amazing soundtrack to the morning. We enjoyed watching Iberian Grey Shrikes in territorial battles.

Late morning we headed to a café on the outskirts of Santa Marta village, complete with impressive giant bird murals! Thermal air currents were building, and all at once the air was filled with Griffon Vultures! They formed a kettle of birds, and among them were Cinereous Vultures, Golden Eagle and a juvenile Spanish Imperial Eagle! There were Crag Martins too, which looked so tiny by comparison!

Our hearty winter picnic featured Pilar's delicious warming lentil soup and two great local cheeses, one of which was seasoned with truffle. Around the picnic area we picked up Eurasian Hoopoe, a showy Sardinian Warbler and wintering Common Chiffchaff. There were more great views of Cinereous Vultures overhead with Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzard and Red Kite, and the Spanish Imperial put in another appearance.

On the final section of the plains, a protected area known as the Llanos de Cáceres, after some scanning, we hit the Extremadura Jackpot! A flock of 46 Great Bustard all in one field! The flock was mixed male and female, strolling around feeding, but with some eager males giving us a show of their famous foam-bath display! We watched these magnificent birds for a long time, before they eventually took off in two groups. It was amazing to see the heaviest flying bird take to the air!

Day 3

Monday 14th November

Today we headed to Monfragüe National Park, a spectacular place known for its dramatic geology as much as its flora and fauna. The entrance is marked by the Peña Falcón rocky promontory, home to several hundred of the area's Griffon and Cinereous Vultures. We arrived just as they were taking to the air, and we had fantastic views of them perched close by on the rock face and soaring overhead. We stayed for quite some time enjoying the spectacle which gave great photographic opportunities, and we also enjoyed Peregrine Falcon, Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Black Redstart.

We stopped for a warming coffee at the village of Villarreal before heading on to our picnic stop. The mirador overlooked a deep river valley with a dam at one end, and while we ate and relaxed, we spotted Blue Rock Thrush, Grey Wagtail and Common Kingfisher. The powerful form of Bonelli's Eagle provided an added thrill!

We ended our day amongst the vultures with a mirror image of the beginning – at the crags of Portilla del Tietar, the Griffons were coming back in to roost after a day's scouring the plains for carrion. We enjoyed the sounds of their impressive wings and prehistoric-sounding calls.

Making a stop by another dammed valley on the way back, we got great scope views of another Bonelli's Eagle which came in to roost there.

Then home for some of Pilar's amazing traditional Extremeñan food. Pilar cooks using recipes handed down through generations, often using ingredients foraged locally such as field mushrooms, wild asparagus and *tagarninas* – the sweet core of a kind of wild thistle.

Day 4

Tuesday 15th November

After breakfast we headed to Monroy plains, this amazing rich area just a five minute drive away from our accommodation. A group of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures sat close by in a field, waiting for the air to warm so their take-off would be worthwhile.

Once again the air was filled with birdsong, from Crested, Thekla's, Calandra and Skylark. Many groups of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse swirled around calling.

After a little scanning, we lucked out again on bustards! This time a group of what looked like 16 Little Bustards in a field. We watched them for a while until they eventually took off, at which point we could see there were many more than 16! The flock split and some birds flew very close to us, eventually landing where we could see their heads poking up from the vegetation. Brilliant!

We had our picnic at the edge of Alcollarín village, the amazing pepper soup was thickened with bread and egg, a real regional dish. We rounded it off with some incredible chocolate pastries, which gave us a nice sugar buzz for the afternoon! Alongside us ran a small scrub-lined rivulet, where we searched to no avail for a recently-spotted Yellow-browed Warbler. We did however enjoy being amongst the sheer number of wintering Common Chiffchaffs and Eurasian Blackcaps.

We headed up to the Alcollarín reservoir where there were many wintering wildfowl including Egyptian Geese, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal, Common Pochard, among hundreds of Northern Shoveler. We picked up Black-necked Grebes among the Great Crested and Little Grebes. Also Common Kingfisher and Western Marsh Harrier.

Drizzle had set in, so we sheltered under a Holm Oak to get close views of waders in the shallows. They included Little Stint, Dunlin, Greenshank, Northern Lapwing, and Black-winged Stilt. In the nature reserve area, we found an Iberian Pond Tortoise wandering about the picnic area!

Day 5

Wednesday 16th November

In the winter, the harvested rice fields of Extremadura are home to tens of thousands of Europe's wintering Common Cranes. They usually arrive in late October but this year, unusual weather and cropping changes had held up their journey south from Germany and France. Luckily for us they were now arriving in force so we went off to explore their favourite roosting and feeding areas.

Our first encounter with these elegant birds was at the ricefields of Fernando V. In the fields were large flocks of Corn Buntings and Spanish Sparrows. Along the reed-fringed ditches we also picked up Red Avadavats and Common Waxbills, these introduced birds doing well here.

At Moheda Alta we took our picnic surrounded by groups of Common Cranes in flight, their gentle, bubbling calls filling the air. From the hide we had stunning views of a Black-winged Kite hunting over the fields, as well as a close Marsh Harrier. Large flocks of hundreds of Spanish Sparrows made quite a racket! A second Black-winged Kite flew in and landed close by on a tree providing excellent scope views of its silvery plumage and burning red eyes.

We headed back to Las Canteras via the area of Vegas Altas. Here, as the sun dropped low in the sky, we watched as over 1500 Common Cranes flew in calling from miles around, to gather together before heading to their reservoir roost site. A really spectacular end to the day!

Day 6

Thursday 17th November

We spent a somewhat damp morning exploring the mixed oak woodlands of Garciaz, where a mixture of Downy Oak and Holm Oak provides a beautiful habitat. Exploring along the valley gave views of Eurasian Jay, Iberian Magpies, Long-tailed Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch (soon to be Iberian Nuthatch!), Short-toed Treecreeper, Redwing, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Rock Petronia, and Hawfinch.

After time to pack, the afternoon was given over to exploring the picturesque medieval streets of Trujillo, home to the conquistador Pizarro brothers who took Peru for the Spanish, and set for the Lannister's home town in TV show Game of Thrones! Highlights were sampling the wares of local cheese expert Oscar, and watching as hundreds of thousands of Spotless Starlings came in to roost noisily in this ancient town.

A satisfying and fitting end to a great trip, and after dinner we toasted our week with delicious, locally-*produced licor de bellotas* – a sweet, Amaretto-like acorn liqueur.

Day 7

Friday 18th November

All too soon our trip was at an end! After a last scan of the sweeping plains around Las Canteras, we said goodbye to Paco and Pilar – and Chulo the dog! – who had made us feel so welcome in their home. Buses loaded, we made our way back to Madrid after a fantastic wintry week full of bustards and more!

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022					
		12	13	14	15	16	17
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>	1	1		2		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				20		2
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				15		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		15	4	✓		✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		1		200		15
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				70		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				10		
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				20		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	2	4				12
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		6		30		8
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				300		
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				10		
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>					1	1
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				7		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	6	✓		2
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				2		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4	2		4		1
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		10	✓	✓		
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1			1		
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	10	40	200	40		✓
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	2	4	30	10		2
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		2				
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1				
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>			3			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1	1		3
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	3		3		2
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	20	50	4	20		10
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4	8	1	2		1
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		46				
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				43		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				8		4
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				220		20
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	30	100	70	100		6
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedecnemus</i>		2	3	2		1
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				4		5
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓		✓		
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				2		
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>						1
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				2		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2		5		4
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				3		
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				4		
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1	1	5		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			2	2		

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022					
		12	13	14	15	16	17
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				7		
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				20		4
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		30	5	✓		✓
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		200		150		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		30				
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		3				
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	1					1
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1					
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1	4	1			
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			4	8		
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2	6	3	2		6
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	5	2	3		4
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1	1		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2	8	2	10		11
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			10	2		10
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		50
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓		1
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	5	15	6	20		✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	6		✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	2		✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		4		✓		✓
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	6	10	2	✓		✓
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				1		
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	5	15	✓	✓		✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			1	2		4
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			20	10		20
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	6		1		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		3
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>						2
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			2	1		2
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>						2
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			5	1		2
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				1		4
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	6	2	20	6		10
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		4	6			4
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	10	20	✓	✓		10
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			4			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022					
		12	13	14	15	16	17
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>						2
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	2	3		1
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>					1	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓			2
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		2	1	3		2
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	5	4	30	✓		✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	2	4	6	✓		✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	2		✓	6		✓
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1			
Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	✓					

Others

		November 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
Mammals							
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	1		1			
Rabbit	<i>Orytolagus cuniculus</i>	✓		✓			
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓	✓		
Otter	<i>Nutria nutria</i>			1			
Egyptian Mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>	1					
Iberian Minion	<i>Minous Iberia</i>		4				
Reptiles and Amphibians							
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	✓			✓		2
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>				✓		
Iberian Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ibérica</i>						1
Invertebrates							
Rhinoceros Beetle spp	<i>Dynastinae spp</i>						1
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓				
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓		✓		
Southern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>		✓				