

Spain – Extremadura at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 28 December 2012



Black Vulture



Common Crane



Steppe near Santa Marta de Magasca



Thekla Lark

Report & images compiled by David and Kate Morris



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Day 1

Saturday 22nd December

Mild and overcast

Having boarded our late morning flight from London, we arrived in a mild but overcast Madrid where we picked up our mini buses and drove west towards Portugal. We made our way through the expansive Spanish agricultural landscape before entering the rolling dehesa of Extremadura as the light quickly dwindled by late afternoon. En-route we observed several skeins of Common Cranes, Red Kite, White Stork and large flocks of Spotless Starling gathering before going to roost. As dusk descended, two Eagle Owls were picked up perched on roadside pylons, with their silhouettes showing their large shape and distinctive ear tufts. By early evening we arrived at our comfortable rural hotel to enjoy a traditional meal, wine and a roaring log fire.

Day 2

Sunday 23rd December

Sunny and mild

A bright and sunny morning greeted the group on our first full day in Extremadura, starting our day off around the grounds whilst David and Kate picked up the next few days' picnic supplies from Trujillo. Azure-winged Magpies, Hoopoe and Spotless Starlings were all added to the list. Fresh bread, cheeses, ham and wine on board we set off south towards the fertile plains of Madrigalejo and Zorita, calling en-route at a patch of steppe near Campo Lugar.

Our first stop on a little side road between Alcollarin and Capmo Lugar proved to be fruitful with Black Redstart, Spanish Sparrows, Zitting Cisticola, Iberian Grey Shrike and White Wagtails busy feeding in the morning sun. Outside the sleepy village of Campo Lugar a group of 70 Stone Curlew dropped into roadside fields allowing us to observe their cryptic behaviour and large yellow eyes.

Upon entering the start of the stony arid steppe we soon located 71 stately Great Bustards feeding with wintering Lapwing and Golden Plover. Due to the Sunday shooting, the rest of the steppe was fairly quiet so we headed further on towards the dam at the Embalse de Sierra Brava. Lunch was enjoyed under mature Holm Oaks with a grandstand view over the lake and the nearby Sierra de Guadalupe. Woodlark sang from the adjacent oaks as Black and Griffon Vultures soared above us as parties of Cranes passed overhead on foraging trips into the dehesa. On the lake large rafts of wildfowl were observed as Great White Egret and Marsh Harrier hunted around the wetland edges.

After lunch we headed towards the fertile rice and maze fields below the dam that were occupied by flocks of feeding cranes along with Cattle Egrets, White Stork and Lapwing. A search of the paddy fields discovered Green Sandpiper, Snipe and Reed Bunting along with wintering Bluethroats, one of which briefly posed alongside the road. A small patch of dehesa en-route to Madrigalejo held no less than 4 Black-winged Kite that hovered over roadside fields in search of small mammals.

The rest of the day was spent exploring the rice fields around Vegas Altas watching cranes come in to their overnight roost as the sun fell to the west. Our first enjoyable days winter birding over, we returned to our charming rural hotel to enjoy another of Belen's home cooked meals and an inexhaustible supply of red wine.

Day 3

Monday 24th December

Cool misty start, with warm and sunny afternoon

After breakfast we headed north towards Monfrague National Park, passing through rolling dehesa full of winter bird life. Parties of Azure-winged Magpies were evident as were the Iberian Grey Shrike on the roadside wires. A stop at the Rio Almonte added Blue Rock Thrush, Grey Wagtail and Serin to the days list, but as we headed further north towards the national park, thick mist started to engulf the higher peaks. Despite the fog we decided to head towards the castle where at the top, breaks in the cloud revealed soaring groups of Griffon Vultures and extensive views across the dehesa back towards Trujillo. With the Pennafalcon shrouded in mist, we pushed on further into the park noting Short-toed Treecreeper and Hawfinch before setting up picnic lunch in the village of Villareal de San Carlos as the sky turned from misty grey to bright blue.

After lunch we headed to the east of the National Park to enjoy a spot of raptor watching at the Portilla del Tietar. The sun basked rocks here held large numbers of Griffon and the odd Black Vulture that flew in and out towards the plains, one flying so low that it barely cleared the groups heads on departure but giving good photo opportunities for many. Raven and Peregrine flew around the rocks, dwarfed by the massive vultures but the highlight of the day was views of a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles as they flew out over the neighbouring dehesa. Kate spotted a large dog Otter fishing in the river downstream of us.

With the fog gone for the day, we headed back towards the Pennafalcon to observe the huge Griffon Vulture colony here. The birds here didn't disappoint with hundreds of them circling around above us, returning from feeding trips from miles away out on the plains. Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and Red-legged were present on the boulder clad roadside banks. After a chance to get changed and refreshed at the hotel, we headed out to Trujillo to enjoy a meal and drinks at a restaurant in this historic Conquistador town.

Day 4

Tuesday 25th December

Showers until mid afternoon then mild and sunny evening

With a mixed weather forecast promised and a grey sky first thing, we headed out to explore the areas of steppe to the north west of Trujillo near the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. As we moved out of the dehesa on to the edge of the open steppe huge numbers of birds were busy feeding around cattle pens adjacent to the road. Azure-winged Magpies, Serins, Goldfinch and Rock Sparrow were found amongst hundreds of Spanish Sparrows, Corn Buntings, Crested and Calandra Larks as they all foraged on the ground. As the clouds cleared for an hour or two, we pressed on out into the open steppe finding Great Bustard, Little Bustard and flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying around above us and stopping to forage in the cattle grazed pasture. Red Kite and Buzzard were all abundant and large concentrations of Lapwing fed in the fields.

With the cloud closing back in and the rain coming on, we drove back towards the hotel at lunch time to enjoy our picnic under cover in the hotel grounds along with wine from the neighbouring vineyard and warming tea and coffee. After chance of an early afternoon siesta, some of the group elected to visit the historic town of Trujillo to take in the towns citadel and historic churches and buildings whilst others went back out on to the Santa Marta Magasca steppe.

On the steppe a large group of Great Bustards were found along with more Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a flock of 54 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse feeding in the evening sun in a roadside field with a Whinchat. Not wanting to miss out on one of their bogey birds for the trip, Peter and Rosemary dashed back out to the steppe to catch up with the pin-tails after enjoying an afternoon in Trujillo. In the evening we headed back into Trujillo to enjoy an evening meal at a local restaurant.

Day 5

Wednesday 26th December

Warm and sunny

We woke to a bright sunny start and decided to go visit the rich wetlands around Almaraz and the Embalse de Arrocampo in the morning and re-visit Monfrague in the afternoon. With hide keys picked up we headed out on the nature reserve trail at Saucedilla finding Purple Gallinule and Kingfisher straight away. A pair of Black-winged Kites hunted around the farmland behind us and Penduline Tit and Purple Heron were observed in the reedbeds. Cetti's Warblers called from the vegetation and vultures cruised overhead towards the snow covered Sierra de Gredos. Lunch was enjoyed alfresco at the reserve where we saw a distant Golden Eagle and butterflies including Berger's Clouded Yellow and Orange Tip. By the time lunch was over, the café was unfortunately closed for mid day coffee so we moved on up the road towards the east of Monfrague National Park.

As we approached the edge of the park within an area of pristine cork oak dehesa, our attention was drawn to a tree that was attracting the interest of numerous Ravens, Red Kites and Common Buzzards. A large brown bird was perched at the centre of the chaos and a quick check in the scope revealed a huge Eagle Owl staring back at us in the daylight with its large orange eyes. Excitement over, we moved on further into the splendid cork oak forest, arriving at the Portilla del Tietar to enjoy more raptors in the warm afternoon sun. Raptors didn't disappoint, with more vulture action from the local Griffon's joined by smaller numbers of the larger Black Vultures plus Peregrine and a stunning adult Spanish Imperial Eagle showing off its bright white leading wing edge against its contrastingly dark plumage.

To complete the afternoon here, as we were about to get in the busses, an adult Bonelli's Eagle circled above with an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle plus numerous vultures. An Otter on the adjacent river kept the mammal fans entertained. Excitement contained, we moved on through the national park to re-visit the Pennafalcon where vultures plus a Golden Eagle soared overhead and a family group of Otters kept us entertained for over 30 minutes playing and fishing in the afternoon light. A fantastic day had by all, we headed back to the hotel as the winter sun sunk below the horizon and enjoyed a well-earned meal along with more local wine and acorn liqueur, plus some local 'fire water' purchased in the local supermarket by Noel.

Day 6

Thursday 27th December

Warm and sunny

On our last full day in Extremadura we decided to re-visit the steppe species and wintering cranes. We kicked off the day after breakfast with a brief stop in Trujillo for picnic provisions and souvenirs of our stay such as Serrano ham, pimenton and acorn liqueur. We started off exploring the steppe directly to the north of Trujillo near Las Canteras, and within minutes at our first stop we picked up the distinctive gruff call of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse much to Mick's relief! Further on up the road we found a group of 43 feeding amongst cattle in a thistle covered pasture and in fields on the opposite side of the road we located a small group of Little Bustard before they took to the wing, flushed by a local shepherd moving his flock.

As the time quickly passed by, we stopped to enjoy a morning coffee at a café in Santa Marta Magasca, doubling the week's takings by purchasing various brandies and liqueurs, with Peter trying the local cloudy brew from a used whiskey bottle – thankfully he survived and managed to see Crag Martin and Thekla Lark near the village along with the rest of the group. Lunch was taken out on the steppe surrounded by the calls of various larks.

After lunch we headed south of the hotel to revisit the rice and maize fields of Madrigalejo, calling first off at some steppe to find a nice flock of Little Bustard. Cranes filled the fields along with quartering Marsh and Hen Harriers and we found a small group of Red Avadavat feeding in the stubble with Spanish Sparrows. As the sun started to set we visited the crane centre and tower hide at Moheda Alta to watch the spectacle of cranes coming in for their winter roost along with another Black-winged Kite.

With the final dregs of light running out, we headed back to the hotel with a brief stop to look at a winter harrier roost and nearby Egret roost. On our final evening at the hotel we enjoyed a delicious beef casserole with more red wine and the musical accompaniment of Marina and Alejandro, our host's children.

Day 7

Friday 28th December

Warm and sunny

On our final morning we enjoyed our last breakfast before loading the vans and saying our goodbyes to our hosts Juan Pedro and Belen. On the drive we observed Azure-winged Magpie, Common Crane, White Storks and numerous Red Kites before arriving at Madrid's Barajas airport for our flight back to London.

Species List

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		20					
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			1		4		
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		30+	40+	2	400+	4	
4	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>					1		
5	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		2			2		
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	40	400	50		60	2000	30
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					2	20	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		6	10		15	1	
9	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					1		
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		150	30	2	200	30	20
11	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					1		
12	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					1		
13	Greylag	<i>Anser anser</i>		200					
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	15	2000		4	20	2	
15	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		30					
16	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		200					
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		12					
18	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		50					
19	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		40					
20	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		4			3	1	
21	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	3	6	15	30	40	20	20
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		80	1000	2	800	100	20
23	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>			15		20	3	
24	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		3		1		2	
25	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		8			6	8	
26	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1			1	
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	20	30	10	8	10	20	10
28	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			2		1		
29	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					2		
30	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus fasciatus</i>					1		
31	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		10	6	2	6	15	10
32	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2		2		
33	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	10	1	6	6	4	4	6
34	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H		
35	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					3		
36	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		400			2		
37	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>					6		
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	50	8000	50	2	100	10000	150
39	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				5		50+	
40	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		71		50	1		
41	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>		70+					
42	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		200		40			
43	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	30	1000	200	500	200	1000	200
44	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						1	
45	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1					
46	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		6		1		1	
47	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		20+					

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		300	10	25	15	400	
49	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		50					
50	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		200				100	
51	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				50			
52	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>				54		43	
53	Feral/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>	2				1		
57	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1		3		
58	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	10	30	20	15	10	15	10
59	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis ssp. sharpei</i>							1
60	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		8		6		6	
61	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>						10	
62	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	20	150	150	500	50	200	30
63	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>						6	
64	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		2		300		200	
65	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rusticola</i>						1	
66	Crag Martin	<i>Hirundoe rupestris</i>			1		8	10	
67	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		50	50	200	30	50	
68	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		3	1		1	1	
70	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H		H		
71	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		2	1				
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		4	2				
73	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		8	15	8	10	10	
74	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		2					
75	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		✓	✓	10	6	✓	
76	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				1			
77	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			4		6		
78	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>						✓	
79	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	1			1	
80	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		6	2	3	6	8	
81	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					1	2	
82	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H			6H		
83	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4			4	2	
84	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	2	15	6	1	2	1	
85	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		10	15	2	6	6	2
86	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		40	10	15	20	20	
87	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>			2			2	
88	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		10+		2	1		
89	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			H		2		
90	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		6	10	8	10	6	
91	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		4	6	3	4	10	
92	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		8		H		8	
93	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			2		H		
94	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>					4		
95	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biamicus</i>					1		
96	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		10	15	30	15	20	2
97	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		10	30	15	10	8	

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
99	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			2	1			
100	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	20	80	200	50	30	30	20
102	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6	10	20	8	10	
103	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>				2			
104	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		1000	✓	500	✓	3000	
105	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
106	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				10+			
107	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
108	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			8	4	1		
109	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	6	15	✓	✓	✓	✓	
110	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				2		1	
111	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	20
112	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		30+	✓	✓	10	✓	
113	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
114	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		8			2		
115	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>		15+				20+	
116	Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		30+					

Mammals

Wild Boar

Iberian Hare

Red Deer

Otter

Rabbit

Mole (hills)

Red Fox

Roe Deer

Butterflies

Small Copper

Orange Tip

Berger's Clouded Yellow

Red Admiral

Common Blue

Herptiles

Natterjack Toad

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