

Spain – Extremadura at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th December 2021

Tour report by Simon Tonkin



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Summary

This Christmas week among the plains and wetlands of Extremadura was full of avian delights, amazing food, culture, history and more! All this despite the whole week (apart from our return travel day!) giving us plenty of rain - much-needed here in Spain but not for our trip! However that didn't stop us enjoying a myriad of special events, with every day flowing with memorable moments. Spanish Imperial Eagles, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, fabulous sightings and views of Great and Little Bustards, fields, skies and airwaves full of bugling Common Cranes and exploring the conquistador town of Trujillo including the magic of the mass Spotless Starling roost and the first returning migratory White Storks.

Day 1

Wednesday 22nd December

Simon met the group at Madrid airport and the group began the journey onwards to the Birdwatching centre and Hotel Rural Las Canteras and our wonderful hosts Paco and his mother Pilar.

Paco and Pilar were ready for our arrival and after a quick bag drop and refresh, we sat down to our traditional Extremaduran dinner lovingly and beautifully prepared by Pilar and most welcomed by us all! Las Canteras is not a hotel but a Casa Rural and as a result we were staying in Paco and Pilar's home - and they really do make you feel at home, complete with a roaring fire ready for our arrival.

A Mediterranean Tree Frog started calling from the conservatory plant pots and as we would discover they were constant and welcome companions over the week. In addition, Niki found a beautiful moth that we often see here when it has been raining in the winter months - *Lemonia philopalus*, found in Central and Southern Spain south to North Africa.

Day 2

Thursday 23rd December

Following breakfast, we headed out to the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca where our first stop was next to a farm pool where we observed Eurasian Hoopoes, Spanish Sparrows, Thekla's Larks and Iberian Magpies among the tree lines. Moving out onto the main area of plains, we found Griffon Vultures and Cinereous Vultures attempting to dry out and sitting close by for wonderful views. Common Cranes were also marching across the plains and some announced their presence as they flew out overhead. Red Kites and Iberian Grey Shrikes were seemingly omni-present and we found them sheltering from the rain among rocks and trees out on the plains. Every so often, a cacophony of noise would go up with Calandra Larks dominating the Crested Larks and Skylarks. Six Black-bellied Sandgrouse whizzed over us.

We moved around to the area of Llanos de Caceres and after some scanning decided to head to a collection of Eucalyptus trees to see what they were sheltering! Sure enough, if you looked hard enough there was a second calendar year Spanish Imperial Eagle resting there! Just to be obliging, it moved out into full view and was enjoyed by us all. We found two more adults too, a little further along. We decided to head to Las Canteras for lunch as the rain was coming down pretty hard by now and so we took our picnic lunch here, pre-prepared by Simon's partner Niki, with local cheeses, hams, olive oil, freshly baked bread and more. Following lunch and

tearing ourselves away from the warming fire, we set out to discover the plains surrounding Las Canteras. Here we found three Little Owls sheltering among the stone walls and a massive group of Little Bustards - 88!! This is a species not only hard to find but declining massively in numbers, a shocking and worrying issue of agricultural change and intensity for meat production. We viewed this group with great interest as they wandered and fed across the grasslands. One of the males decided it was close enough to Spring to start leaping, so we witnessed a little mini-display of "*El paso doble de Sisón*"!

Day 3

Friday 24th December

¡Feliz Noche Buena!

Today we headed to the plains of Campo Lugar. Here we found two Black-bellied Sandgrouse and masses of Calandra Larks, Meadow Pipits and Corn Buntings, a couple of Hen Harriers and more rain!

We headed downwards to the rice fields of Fernando V where it actually stopped raining! Here we were immediately among masses of Common Cranes, and a few White Storks, already returned for the Spring. Reeds and willows were full of both Common Waxbills and Red Avadavats and a few Great Egrets.

To our surprise, a Turtle Dove flew over and joined the assembled Collared Doves on a wire! Quite disbelieving of this unseasonal record we got the scope on it to confirm - a Christmas omen indeed! And yes there were four Red-legged Partridge! We had to wait for the special Pear tree (day 7).

Further on flooded rice fields yielded yet more Common Cranes, and bushes were alive with Spanish Sparrows and Chaffinches with the odd Brambling to be found. We scoped up some Black-winged Stilts and Green Sandpipers and then headed to our picnic lunch spot at Moheda Alta. Here among the trees, we took our picnic lunch and as we did, Sardinian Warblers popped into view alongside flickering Black Redstarts.

Following our beautiful picnic (thanks Niki) We walked through the woodland *dehesa* and out to the hide, taking in more woodland birds Firecrest, Crested Tits and two Woodlark.

From the hide, masses of Common Cranes flew past as a gorgeous male Hen Harrier hunted the fields right in front of us and he decided to land in front of the hide for a close up in the scope!

Following lunch and a comfort break which yielded a great view of a gorgeous Iberian Grey Shrike at close quarters, we headed for the rice fields of Vegas Altas. Taking a slightly higher position, we were able to watch (and count!) 2,509 Common Cranes moving over towards their roost site which was only a fraction of those we had seen that day! Here we were also able to watch Black-winged Kites quartering the area with Red Kites and both Marsh and Hen Harriers doing the same.

Day 4

Saturday 25th December

¡Feliz Navidad!

Today we headed for the famous Monfragüe Parque Nacional, a Bioserve and UNESCO site. We started at the impressive rock promontory of the Peña Falcón where we watched as c.300 Griffon Vultures took to the air among the mist just hanging over the top of the rock. Joining them were impressive and slightly larger Cinereous Vultures demonstrating just how huge they are - being Europe's biggest raptor and one of the biggest Old World Vultures.

Among the rocky crags sheltering Crag Martins were found as they took to the air momentarily to presumably suck up some flying insects.

We took our lunch in the little hut at the Portilla del Tiétar. Here, just like our very own live Nativity scene, we sheltered from the rain as we took our lunch of chickpea soup (*gracias* Pilar!) and an array of local cheeses, freshly baked bread and a traditional Christmas cake - Roscón de Reyes (normally consumed on the Epiphany or Día de Reyes). There was of course wine, organic juices and even *cava!* As we huddled in our manger, we viewed out as Common Kingfishers whizzed by, Blue Rock Thrushes sang whilst we appreciatively viewed them, Black Redstarts hopped and Griffon Vultures looked fairly fed up! Even Eurasian Otter put in a very brief appearance too!

Retracing our steps we stopped at the Mirador de Tajadilla where some Red Deer crossed the water and fed right next to us. We watched several Hawfinch go over and one gave us superb scope views.

We then headed back to the Peña Falcón. Here we got more views of the impressive Vultures and a really close up view of a singing Blue Rock Thrush, the closest view however was reserved for the rather obliging male Rock Bunting that decided it would shelter right next to us, allowing Daphne getting some awesome photos!

Day 5

Sunday 26th December

We started today exploring the nearby plains and the Cañada Puente Mocha. Here we found 23 feeding Little Bustards - not a bad way to start a day!

We then headed out to the Embalse de Alcollarín. As the rain came in, we took shelter under a Holm Oak and viewed the reservoir and the assembled masses of wintering duck from our beautifully sheltered viewpoint. We counted 4,410 Northern Shoveler, 210 Great Crested Grebes, 30 Black-necked Grebes, 50 Gadwall, 10 Eurasian Wigeon, 40 Eurasian Teal, 20 Egyptian Geese, Northern Pintail and a whole load of Mallards! We took time to sift through the flocks identifying and going through the salient identification features. We counted up to 10 Great Egrets and had great comparisons with them right alongside Little Egrets and Cattle Egrets! Three unusual but not uncommon overwintering Black Stork were found too. Some individual Black Storks often can be found here in Extremadura and the lower Guadalquivir valley in Andalucía over the winter, but the vast majority migrate to sub-Saharan Africa.

Among the Iberian Pear Trees (*Pyrus bourgaeana*) Common Chiff-chaffs flitted and Firecrests called. We headed back to Las Canteras for lunch by the fire and once fed and warmed up, we headed out to the Llanos de Caceres for Eurasian Hoopoes, Iberian Grey Shrikes and masses of Calandra Larks. We could hear Pin-tailed Sandgrouse calling. It took some time but we eventually picked a massive group of at least 120. We got respectfully closer to the group being extremely careful not to disturb them and we were able to get fabulous views of them feeding and marching across the plain.

Day 6

Monday 27th December

Today we once again headed to the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca, but this time in brilliant sunshine! We were able to connect with seven Black-bellied Sandgrouse and two Spanish Imperial Eagles gave some fabulous views.

Niki was ahead birding with our friend Martin and messaged us to say they had found the one species we were missing from our plains list! YES!GREAT BUSTARDS ! A little distant, but we were able to get a good angle from the road. Frustratingly they took flight and at first we couldn't pick them up again! But just like a Christmas pantomime we simply needed to look behind us - 44 Great Bustards had decided to come a lot closer and we had crippling views of them marching through the nearby field, in fact toward us!

Following our picnic on the edge of Santa Marta watching Red Kites, Common Buzzards and both Cinereous and Griffon Vultures, we headed into the historic town of Trujillo. We had a stop at the affectionately named "*Belén's pool of dreams*" named after a friend who shops nearby and discovered it for us! Here in this little town park, freshwater pools harboured a Little Ringed Plover, up-close Black-winged Stilts and a Mute Swan - a year tick for Simon, but perhaps less impressive for the rest of the team!

As we walked into the Plaza Mayor of Trujillo we discussed the historical points, the conquistadors and links to the Americas. Following a coffee or a beer for some, we walked up the cobbled narrow streets to the Castillo. Trujillo was settled in prehistoric times on a granite knoll which was readily fortified and easily defendable. From 711, following the Islamist conquest, it was ruled by a caliphate until the middle of the 11th century. During this time, the ethnic tensions between Berbers and Arabs weakened the Caliphate militarily.

Now we stood on-top of this same granite knoll overlooking the plains and Trujillo - almost everywhere we had explored this week was viewable and we took some time to point out the different sections of plains and the birds and other wildlife we had seen there.

As the sunlight began to diminish, we were on point to witness a fitting end to a marvellous week of Christmas in Extremadura - perhaps hundreds of thousands (we don't actually know the true number) of Spotless Starlings amassed on the town, coming from all directions like an invading avian army, they took to the trees and rooftops of Trujillo below us. We watched as these birds having spent the day among the plains converged on the town to roost in the warmer streets and possibly to exchange views on the best feeding areas. One of the enduring memories was putting the binoculars on a random bit of sky and seeing black snow as arriving Spotless Starlings filled our fields of view. One of those magical views impossible to capture in photos or videos, we did the better thing and engrained the experience into our memories!

Walking back through the narrow gorgeously-lit streets of Trujillo to the now deafening throng of Spotless Starlings, we were able to get another experience of Trujillo at night where the Plaza Mayor took on another character. We took photos of the unique splendour this town takes on at night and the lights of Christmas decorations and the picturesque Nativity scene.

After time to shop for souvenirs and some of Trujillo's world-beating cheese, we headed back to another warm welcome from Paco and another very welcome beautifully home-cooked traditional evening meal by our adopted *madre* Pilar!

Day 7

Tuesday 28th December

Goodbyes are hard so we simply bid *¡hasta luego!* to Pilar and Paco and thanked them for their exceptional hospitality (including delicious lunchtime soup to go with our luxury picnic!) and making us feel so at home for our Christmas in Extremadura and reluctantly headed toward Madrid.

We called in at the Embalse de Arrocampo adding Tree Sparrow, a calling Penduline Tit and views of Western Swamphen before arriving at Madrid airport for the group's own onward journeys. To be honest it all seemed a bit abrupt after sharing so many adventures, but we hope to see you again soon!

¡Hasta pronto!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2021						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						1	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>		2	10		20		
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					50		
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		10			10		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		20			4,410	✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					1		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		10			40	3	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		8	4		15	10	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1			✓	16	2
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					210		
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					30		
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					3		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		1	20	1	15	6	4
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					6		
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>							1
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			80			5	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			6	4	✓	6	4
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1	1	10		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					5		2
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2	32	✓	✓	7
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			3				1
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>							
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		43		300	20	10	✓
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		14		10	15	5	10
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		3				4	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	2	1	2	2
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1	8	1	3	1	3
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			4			1	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		30	✓	2	50	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	5	4	10	4	2
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>						44	
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		88			23		
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							1
Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>							3
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1			15	2
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					30	10	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		200	2,509	40	100	9	✓
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			20			10	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		4	140		✓	✓	✓
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>						1	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		4	10		4	4	2
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					1		
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			6		4	1	1
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				1	2		2
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	4	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	December 2021						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			1				✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		1	20		✓	4	✓
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>					120	88	
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		6	2			7	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domestica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		50	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		10				17	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>			1				
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		3		1	3		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1		4	6		2
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		2	7	3	8	7	4
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>							1
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3	4	2	3	2	4
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1				
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		10	20	6	15	15	4
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				10			
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	30	40	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	10	10	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>					10	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		30	✓	10	30	20	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			4	8	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			6	5	✓	✓	✓
Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			2	3			
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>							1
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			4				
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		200	300	10	400	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				100	50	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			4				6
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			6	✓	✓		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	4	10	15	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>					1		4
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2	✓	4	1	2
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	4	4	2	2	5
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2	2			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1		1			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			4	2			
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		6			✓		
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		6	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			1	20			
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			20	50			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	6	10	3	1	2
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	6	15	10	2	3
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				3			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	December 2021						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>							2
Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				1		2	
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			20				5
Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			10				
Dunnoek	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			1	2			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				3		1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>		✓	✓	10	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	1	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			9				
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				14			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1	2			2	4
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		20	10		10	6	20
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			2				3
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				3			
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>							2

Others (S = signs, D = Dead)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2021						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1			
Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>		1			1	D	1
Rabbit	<i>Orytolagus cuniculus</i>					S	✓	2
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				30			
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		2			2		1
Iberian Frog	<i>Rana Iberica</i>			✓				
	<i>Lemonia philopalus</i>		✓					
European Rhinoceros Beetle	<i>Oryctes nasicornis</i>						1	
Devils Coachorse	<i>Ocypus olens</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Red-Palm Weevil	<i>Rhynchophorus ferrugineus</i>						2	