

Spain – Extremadura at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th December 2022



Griffon Vulture by Simon Tonkin



Trujillo by Simon Tonkin

Tour report by Niki Williamson



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Summary

This seven-day festive adventure across the stunning landscapes of Extremadura brought the group avian Christmas gifts galore!

On the plains, our sightings of Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Spanish Imperial Eagle came alongside plenty of lovely stocking fillers such as Iberian Grey Shrike, Thekla's and Calandra Lark, Eurasian Hoopoe, Little Owl and huge mixed flocks of Spanish Sparrow, Corn Buntings and Rock Petronia.

If Extremadura is a delicious chocolate truffle, then Monfragüe National Park is surely its crunchy centre, and the sights of hundreds of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures circling overhead on Christmas Eve certainly left us feeling sweet! Iberian Magpies, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Rock Bunting and European Otter were extra treats!

Exploring the ricefields and reservoirs, we enjoyed Bonelli's Eagles, Black-winged Kites, Hen Harrier, Black-necked Grebe, Red-crested Pochard, Black Stork and thousands of carolling Common Cranes.

Superb wildlife encounters, all celebrated with warm hospitality from our hosts and hearty meals featuring traditional dishes, local cheeses and plenty of bubbly!

Day 1

Thursday 22nd December

Simon and Niki gathered the group from Madrid airport, and we were soon on our way across the sweeping landscapes of Castilla la Mancha and on to Extremadura. We broke up the journey to our accommodation with a comfort stop, where we could see a flock of Spanish Sparrows foraging in a nearby field and Spotless Starlings starting to amass in a treetop roost.

We arrived at our base at Casa Rural Las Canteras after dark, where we were welcomed by our host Paco, and our chef, his mother Pilar, who soon served us our first three course meal. It featured a delicious hot tomato soup thickened with bread, followed by well-seasoned *chicharrones* of Iberian Black Pork, washed down with a local red.

Day 2

Friday 23rd December

As the sun rose over Las Canteras, beautifully situated in the middle of the Extremeñan plains, for the group it was the first chance to view our location and it was a bit like opening an early Christmas present! As we gathered in the grounds, Little Owl, Eurasian Hoopoe and a flock of Rock Petronias bade us welcome.

We headed out to the plains of Santa Marta. At our first stop, several Thekla's Larks fed, and Iberian Grey Shrike sang from a bush.

On the ground in a nearby field we spotted a small group of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures – on closer inspection there was a Spanish Imperial Eagle alongside them! We got great views before it finally flew off.

At our next stop were many Pin-tailed Sandgrouse zipping about, eventually giving superb views on the ground. Calandra and Thekla's Larks provided the soundtrack.

Simon showed the group to a café in Santa Marta while Niki made a start on lunch at the picnic area on the edge of village. From here Red Kites and more Griffon Vultures were visible gathering over the nearby plains of Llanos de Cáceres – our next stop.

Moving on we got better views of these, and also two excellent Bonelli's Eagles perched on a nearby post! We got great views of the remarkable size difference between the male and the much larger female.

Heading on to the last stretch of plain we finally hit the bustard jackpot! Jenny somehow picked up a distant flock, looking more like sheep at this distance! Happily, we were eventually able to follow a road which took us much closer, and excellent scope views were enjoyed by all.

Day 3

Saturday 24th December

We made a stop for fresh bread in the village of Torrejón el Rubio on our way to Monfragüe National Park, arriving just as vultures began leaving their colonial roosts. At the iconic rocky pinnacle of Peña Falcon, great swirling masses of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures rose over our heads with Mediterranean Peregrine Falcon and Red Kite. We also encountered Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Short-toed Treecreeper and Rock Bunting and singing Woodlark was heard.

After a brief (and more rustic than intended!) comfort stop at Villareal village, we stopped for picnic lunch overlooking a swollen river where both Grey and White Wagtails flitted. It featured salads, fruits, olives, *tortilla de patatas* (Spanish omelette), *salchichón* (a kind of local cured sausage) and two award-winning local cheeses – as well as several passing Hawfinches!

Our last stop at the twisted crags of Portilla del Tietar was a mirror image of the first as vultures began to return to their roosts. Two Golden Eagles flew low over the cliffs and Iberian Magpies flitted through the trees. We got rather stunning views of two European Otters, fishing together and moving along the banks of the river.

We made a brief stop on the way back to enjoy feeding flocks of farmland birds including Rock Petronias, Spanish Sparrows and Corn Buntings, then headed back to base to celebrate Christmas Eve with delicious cuts of local *retinta* steak and vegetable frittata.

¡Feliz Noche Buena!

Day 4

Sunday 25th December

¡Feliz Navidad!

We awoke to a bright sunlit morning on which to celebrate our Christmas day among the pastures and rice fields of Extremadura. We began at the fields of Fernando V. Here Common Cranes were dotted about the landscape

bugling gently, and Red Avadavats sat in the bushes like little baubles! A distant Great Bustard sailed overhead, and we were surrounded by big noisy flocks of Spanish Sparrows and Corn Buntings.

We had our Christmas lunch at the Holm Oak *dehesa* (wooded pasture) of Moheda Alta, where Common Cranes filled the air with their soft bugling calls like Christmas carollers! We had outstanding views of three gorgeous Black-winged Kites and a Hen Harrier. Our guides chose today to hit “Peak Cheese”, gracing the picnic with the region’s famous delicious Torta de Casar, an unctuous, pungent creation eaten straight from its shell with fresh local bread. This was washed down with some swiftly demolished local *cava*!

We arrived at the ricefields of Vegas Altas as sun dropped low. As we explored the landscape we picked up a Hen Harrier and Common Waxbills. A bunch of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew in making their bubbling call, and then to our surprise a flock of Little Bustards turned up – talk about the icing on the Christmas cake!

As we prepared to head home into the sunset, a fantastic flock of over 1000 Common Cranes flew right over us, as we too headed home to roost.

Day 5

Monday 26th December

A drive time of just seven minutes took us to our first stop at the Cruce de Monroy, overlooking the Monroy plains. At our first stop, Thekla’s and Calandra Larks were numerous and close, and a distance group of Northern Ravens “gronked” at us. The fields were littered with so many Golden Plover, making their cute call and sparkling like tinsel in the sun.

A little further on, a huge group of birds resting in the ground proved to be 200+ Pin-tailed Sandgrouse! We could see two farmers walking towards them and we waited to see if they would all take off. But instead, in a much closer field, a group of 24 Little Bustards took to the air! We got great views of their white wings in flight before they settled in a field just out of view.

After a brief stop for fresh bread and an enormous goo-ey apple cake, we headed to lunch just outside the village of Alcollarín. Simon took the group for a stroll along a rivulet – rather riskily leaving Niki alone with the cake – and picked up Common Waxbill and dozens of wintering Common Chiffchaffs.

On the nearby reservoir – the focus of our afternoon - were enormous numbers of wintering Northern Shoveler. Among them Great Crested, Little and Black-necked Grebe, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal and a single Red-crested Pochard. A Black Stork hung out with Great White Egrets. White Storks and Black Vultures soared low over our heads and two Bonelli’s Eagles joined a pair of Griffon Vultures in an air current. A lovely Dartford Warbler showed well on a bush, seemingly unashamed of the Boxing Day red wine stains down his front...

Day 6

Tuesday 27th December

Our last full day, and after a brief stop at a parkland on the outskirts of Trujillo, we headed out to explore some nearby woodlands. This mountain forest was an attractive mix of leafy evergreen Holm Oak and ghostly deciduous Downy Oak, whose bare wintery branches were covered in thick lichen.

Through the trees moved Eurasian Jays and a big noisy flock of Iberian Magpies. We got great views of the local Iberian subspecies of Eurasian Nuthatch.

We had lunch - including another cheeky glass of festive local *cava* – in a river valley by a pretty packhorse bridge, which had been partly washed away by recent floods.

In the afternoon, there was time to look around the historic and picturesque town of Trujillo. On the map since Roman times, this settlement was famously home of the Pizarro brothers, *conquistadores* of Peru. Its pretty medieval streets centre around a Moorish *castillo*. It also forms part of the area's Important Bird Area, and comes complete with roosting Crag Martins and nesting White Storks!

But the grand finale was still to come! As the sun set, hundreds of thousands of Spotless Starlings poured in from their plains feeding grounds to form noisy roosts across the town. We watched them fill the sky and cover every available lamp post and palm tree, chattering, clicking and whistling their news to one another – spectacular!

A fitting end to a trip full of wildlife highlights! After another hearty meal from Pilar's kitchen, we toasted our festive week with *licor de bellota* – a local acorn-flavoured liqueur.

Day 7

Wednesday 28th December

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 festive week full of bustards and more!

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						1	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>				7			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		4			30	3	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					8		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	6			✓	20	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		10			800		
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					20		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					40		
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					1		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2	4		4	6	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1			6	6	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					50		
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					4		
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					1		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	6	21	20	40	50	10	4
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				3	1		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				✓			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			11	8	10		
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1		7		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				1	10		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	5	32	20	✓	4	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1		6			
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	20	70	240	10	30	15	✓
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	2	20	30	2	4		10
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1					
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			2				
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		2			2		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			2		1		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	4	2	1	15	3		2
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				4	2		
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	15	✓	✓	10	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	4	✓	✓	4	2
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		31		1			
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				7	24		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1	2	5	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					20	8	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	20	30	50	###	30	20	30
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>					1		
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		2					
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	30	✓	✓		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				8			
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1		1			
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				3		2	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					6		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		40	30	70	✓	4	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		20		30	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		200		80	173		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				9			
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	1						
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		6	3		1	1	2
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2	2	1		
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	8	7	8	10	4	
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>						1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		3	2	4	5	3	2
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2				
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		5	3	10	15	4	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			10			20	3
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	8	4	8	✓	10	✓
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						5	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			4	5	10	8	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	3	2	5	5	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			1	2		4	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		20		✓	✓	✓	
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		10	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		10	✓		✓	20	4
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1			4	8	3	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				15	6	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	4	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				4	5	1	2
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	4	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>					2	1	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	7	4	5	4	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2				
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			2				
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>						10	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			6	2		2	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1						
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2	5	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		3					
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			8	✓	✓	5	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						2	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	4	5	✓	✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		11	16	5	10	6	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			3				
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				2			

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		6	5				
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				20			
Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>				10			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			2			1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			3		4	5	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			4	6	8	10	2
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4	8	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	1	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			4	5			
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1			2	

Others

Common name	Scientific name	December 2022						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mammals								
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			2				
Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>					1	1	
Rabbit	<i>Orytolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓					
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓			✓	
Reptiles and Amphibians								
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Iberian Marsh Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>						✓	
Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>		✓					
Butterflies								
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>		✓					
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>					✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓	✓		
Dappled White	<i>Euchloe crameri</i>		✓					
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>		✓					
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓					
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					✓		
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>					✓		
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>						✓	