

Spain – Extremadura at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th December 2023



Hen Harrier



Griffon Vulture



Crag Martin



Common Crane

Tour report by Niki Williamson and Simon Tonkin, photos by Simon Tonkin



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Tour report by Niki Williamson & Simon Tonkin. Photos by Simon Tonkin.

Summary

Some misty atmospheric days perforated with bright sunny ones awaited our Christmas story this year! Whatever the weather, Extremadura shone as usual, with great encounters with both Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, and several Spanish Imperial Eagles!

Picnics featuring hearty soups and delicious local produce warmed us through some fantastic days full of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures, thousands of Common Cranes, wintering wildfowl galore including Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Wigeon, Teal, Northern Pintail, Black-necked, Great Crested and Little Grebes, and plenty of classy stocking-fillers like Blue Rock Thrush, Black Stork, Thekla's and Calandra Larks, Hen Harrier, Iberian Grey Shrikes, Iberian Magpies and more!

As always, Paco and Pilar kept the home fires burning and made it a cosy Christmas for all by the log burner, with plenty of hearty Extremadureñan food and wine to aid our festivities!

Day 1

Friday 22nd December

Once free of the Christmas chaos of Madrid airport and the city roads, we made the drive to our accommodation in the wilds of Extremadura.

We arrived at Casa Rural Las Canteras in good spirits and our hosts Paco and Pilar made us welcome. We were soon settled into our rooms and relaxing around our cosy dinner table near the log burner. After a meal of Iberian pork with salad for the vegetarians, followed by ice cream cake we discussed all things nature and slowly ambled to our beds.

Eurasian Magpies, Red Kites and White Wagtails were seen en route from the airport, whetting our appetite for the week's birding!

Day 2

Saturday 23rd December

It was an atmospheric start to the day as mist shrouded the valleys and plains. Calling Common Cranes beckoned to us and we set out for the day wrapped up warm!

Our first stop was on the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca and yielded Spanish Sparrows and Iberian Grey Shrikes. The mist was stubborn in clearing so we headed for a higher point. Here we encountered Black-bellied Sandgrouse foraging and flying over, as hundreds of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse pierced the mist with their ghostly calls! We were also surrounded by Calandra Larks, Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, Iberian Grey Shrikes and more! The birding festivities had begun!

We got to grips with separating Thekla's and Crested Larks before moving on to our lunch spot on the edge of Santa Marta village. Here we figured out how to open the massive vacuumed container of delicious chickpea and

vegetable soup as Cinereous Vultures were separated from Griffon Vultures, masses of Red Kites assembled and Black Redstarts bounced in and out of view!

Following lunch, we moved on to the Llanos de Caceres Special Protection Area, where we found several delightful Eurasian Hoopoes. There were also brilliant views of two sub-adult Spanish Imperial Eagles feeding and squabbling over remnants of livestock placenta.

Further on we found another two adult Spanish Imperial Eagles! As we scanned out across the plains, suddenly over 30 Great Bustards strolled into view! We watched them for ages and enjoyed their primary warm-up attempts at a spring display! A real Christmas treat!

Deciding to end on this high note we headed back to Las Canteras and immediately found a Little Owl on the nearby farm buildings. Common Cranes bugled in the distance to mark the end of a magic day.

Day 3

Sunday 24th December

Today we headed out firstly to the plains of Campo Lugar, where we immediately found eight Great Bustards! Then we dropped down to Fernando V rice fields, where we were surrounded by Common Cranes flying over, wandering the fields and noisily announcing their presence. Spanish and Tree Sparrows, Red Avadavats and Common Waxbills were encountered along the field margins. As a group of endemic Iberian Magpies flew in front of us, a lone unseasonal Black Stork was spotted. We also spotted White Storks nearby.

We travelled on to the visitor centre at Moheda Alta. Here we took our lunch among the Holm Oaks where Common Cranes wandered among the trees in search of acorns and other tasty treats!

From the observatory here we had both male and female Hen Harrier drift right in front of us - twice! We then headed finally to Vegas Altas rice fields, as Common Cranes in their thousands drifted by in long lines to their various roosting spots. Nearby fields held on average 200 cranes each as more poured noisily over the area.

Soon it was time to say *¡Adios!* to the Cranes and head for our own Noche Buena party at Las Canteras - *¡Felices Fiestas!*

Day 4

Monday 25th December

We headed on Christmas Day morning to a deserted and magical Monfragüe National Park, where we first of all made a misty stop to listen to Firecrests and other woodland birds flitting through the lichen-covered trees.

At the famous crags of Peña Falcon, we could hear Griffon Vultures calling, sounding spooky in the mist! Close by, we had nice views of Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart.

We journeyed on through the park and stopped for our Christmas Lunch at the beauty stop of Mirador La Tajadilla. Today we introduced the group Torta de Casar – a stunning, award-winning local cheese. washed down with some festive local cava! Crag Martins and Rock Bunting accompanied us!

Driving on through the park we spotted several groups of Red Deer. At the Portilla del Tietár, the mist lifted enough to get lovely views of Cinereous Vultures staring down from the twisted rock formations.

It was soon time to head back through the park. Back at Peña Falcón rocks, the sun broke through for a gorgeous moment of clarity, as many Griffon Vultures lifted off to give us the magnificent flyby we had been hoping for!

Day 5

Tuesday 26th December

Another misty day this Boxing Day, but with pretty sunbeams starting to break through! On our journey out we stopped in a sunny farmland spot where we found Rock Sparrow (Rock Petronia), Thekla's Larks and Meadow Pipits feeding together, as well as Iberian Magpies and Iberian Grey Shrike.

We were headed to the reservoir of Alcollarín but we followed our noses to have a look at Campo Lugar plains once more. Some great moments awaited with Merlin, Calandra Larks and Marsh Harriers showing well.

We took a warming coffee or hot chocolate at the friendly El Cruce cafe, then headed on to picnic lunch at the tiny municipal park of Alcollarín village. We enjoyed another of Pilar's hearty warming soups along with more local cheeses, olives, salads and fresh bread. On the neighbouring stream, we spotted Common Kingfisher, many Common Chiffchaffs and flocks of Common Waxbills.

Heading up to the top of the reservoir dam, we could look out over flocks of literally thousands of wintering wildfowl. Among the huggings of Northern Shoveler, were Eurasian Wigeon, Teal, Northern Pintail and more. We picked out Black-necked Grebes among the Great Crested and Little Grebes. There were more lovely Common Kingfisher views too.

On the shoreline, a Black Stork loitered with Little and Great Egret, watching a Marsh Harrier dismember what appeared to be a dead lamb – and presumably hoping to get in on the Boxing Day leftovers action!

Day 6

Wednesday 27th December

More plains action today as we headed out to the area of steppe around the village of Belén. At our first stop we enjoyed many Griffon and Cinereous Vultures on the ground tucking into some carrion with Red Kites and Northern Ravens waiting in the wings, and even a Spanish Imperial Eagle looking on from a distance...

And then, one of those sunny patches! This one contained a flock of no less than 12 Little Bustards showing really well - amazing!

As the day got sunnier and sunnier, we headed up to the woodlands of Garciaz for our picnic among the Downy Oaks, and our final helping of delicious hot soup and local produce! A Eurasian Nuthatch (soon to be Iberian Nuthatch!) gave good views, as did the wooded valley itself.

After lunch we headed into Trujillo town, where we first enjoyed some urban birding in the park, with many feeding Crag Martins, and one of Spain's few Mute Swans! Then there was time to wander the historic medieval

streets of the town, surrounded by the noisy spectacle of thousands of Spotless Starlings coming home to roost after a hard day's foraging on the surrounding plains! A lovely way to finish our festive week's birding.

Day 7

Thursday 28 December

After a hearty breakfast and a truly spectacular sunrise, it was time to wish Pilar, Paco and Chulo the dog a happy new year and say our goodbyes. Simon and Niki delivered the group to Madrid without incident, and with time to enjoy their farewell *bocadillos*!



Common Chiffchaff

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						1	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>		13					
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		10			30		
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					20		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		20			30	10	
Red Crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					2		
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		1			672 0		
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					10		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		4			20		
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					4		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2		6	6		2
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2			40	3	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					50		
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					8		
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1		1		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		4	20		30	10	12
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					4		
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓		6				✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		2	4	6	15	4	2
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					3		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			1		2		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		6	3	30	20	5	2
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		40		90	1	40	4
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		10		4		6	1
Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		4				1	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		2	5		6	4	1
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			2			1	1
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		70	40	20	20	50	20
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		14	6	4	5	8	3
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		36	8				
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						12	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					1		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1		1	4	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					200	3	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			106 9	✓	8	6	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		2	2		1	4	1
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		200	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1				
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1				
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1	2	3	2		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				2	4		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		11	✓		✓	4	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>					1		3
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		2	4		3	5	1
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		200					
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		30					

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		3	10	4			40
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2	2	1	2	1	1
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2	1	3		
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		5	4	5	7	6	2
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			2	1			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	4	2	2	3	2
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	1		1		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		4	7	4	10	7	2
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				5	✓		
Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>			40	50	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	10	3	10	3	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6	8	4	6	16	2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			4	6	2	4	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				10	1	3	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				2		10	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		5	2		3	30	2
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		11	3	2	20	2	3
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓			40	✓
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		60	✓	10	70	120	20
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					3		
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		1		20	30	15	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			2		1		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			10	8		10	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		5	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			2		1		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			3	✓	✓	4	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>					1		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		4	4	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1	2	6			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			2	4	1		
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				1		2	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					1	1	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>						2	
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			3	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>							
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			30	50	20	10	2
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2		2		2	1
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			10	20	✓	✓	✓
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			2				
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		7	2	10	20	9	2
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2			
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>							
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		30	✓		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			2				

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Rock Petronia	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					10	3	2
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓		40		
Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			✓				
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>						1	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1			1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		2	10	✓	✓	4	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				4			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		3	2		15	2	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	4	80	30		30	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	10	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		5	1	4		15	4
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				2			

Others

Common name	Scientific name	December 2023						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mammals								
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>						1	
Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>						2	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				✓			
Butterflies								
Green-striped White	<i>Euchloe belemia</i>			✓				
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>			✓				
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓				