

Spain - The Best of Coto Donana

Naturetrek Tour Report

11- 15 May 2007



El Rocio by Dr Kevin Elsby



Azure-winged Magpie by Tom McJannet



Glossy Ibis by Dr Kevin Elsby



White Stork by Dr Kevin Elsby

Report compiled by Dr Kevin Elsby



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Day 1

Friday 11th May

The party gathered together at Gatwick and we departed on time, leaving England under cloudy skies. A mere two and a half hours later we were leaving Seville airport for the 58 mile trip to our base in the Coto Donana, the Tourño Hotel in El Rocio.

Unfortunately, we arrived in the peak of the Seville Friday evening rush hour, and progress was very slow getting across the Guadalquivir River. Fortunately, with the help of some satellite navigation, we were soon leaving the city behind us and driving into a beautiful sunset - the first of several over the next few days.

After about an hour and a half, we arrived at El Rocio. This really is a most extraordinary town, seemingly built on sand. There are no paved roads in most of the town, and horses are as much a part of the traffic scene as cars. With hitch-up posts dotted everywhere, it does indeed feel as if one is entering a set from "A Fistful of Dollars" or another spaghetti western.

We were soon settled in and had a lovely meal in the restaurant, and talked about our hopes for the next few days. I always like to hear the particular species each client wants to see on the trip. Then it was time to get some sleep before the early start tomorrow.

Day 2

Saturday 12th May

Today dawned misty and a little cool, but things soon got better when the sun started to exert its influence on things.

We left in two Land Rovers for our full day in the Coto Donana, with two guides Abel and Jesus. We left the town behind us as we headed east into the park. Today we would visit several places in the park that are normally out of bounds for the general visitor. These included the Coto del Rey, Matasgordas and Arroyo Mayor.

Our first wildlife sightings consisted of Short-toed Treecreepers in the stone pines, which proved rather elusive. There were a few Sardinian Warblers in the same area, and a Common Cuckoo put in an appearance. Overhead numerous Black Kites were in action quartering over the forest, whilst the odd passing White Stork dwarfed them.

Leaving the forest, we moved south to the marshes, which, even after the unprecedented rainfall in this part of Spain this spring, were already drying out.

Our first Hoopoes and Corn Buntings were found, together with the Iberian race of the Yellow Wagtail. A couple of Nightingales were singing from nearby bushes, whilst two Red Kites (the much more uncommon, more attractive, cousin of the Black Kite) and a Marsh Harrier appeared.

By now, the mist was clearing and it was obvious that today was going to be a typically hot day in the Donana.

Soon, the first Griffon Vultures were circling overhead - at one point there must have been over 50 birds in the air together. Then, as we progressed south, stopping at suitable points, a group of Collared Pratincoles became evident. They were intent on driving away the quartering Black Kites, and several times we watched as the kites were struck by the pratincoles.

There were several Crested Larks here, and it wasn't long before we had also spotted some Short-toed Larks among them. They were very hard to pick out, however, their plumage being very similar from a distance to the colour of the dried clay on which they were walking. Four Calandra Larks put in a brief appearance, the white on the secondary wing feathers showing up particularly well.

Today was a day of herons. We started with several Grey Herons, which were then followed by a succession of relations - Purple Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, a single majestic Great White Egret, Night Heron, Squacco Heron and at least three male Little Bitterns - which were so close we could easily hear their 'cough-like' display calls. With a supporting cast of numerous other water birds, including beautiful Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Red-crested Pochard, Black-necked Grebe and hundreds of Greater Flamingos, as well as hundreds of Ringed Plovers and a flock of Grey Plovers in summer dress, we eventually arrived at the reception centre Jose Antonio Valverde. Here we were able to cool off with a refreshing drink while being entertained by literally thousands of breeding birds. These consisted mainly of Glossy Ibis, with good numbers of Purple Herons and Cattle Egrets. One sharp-eyed member of the group spotted a Purple Gallinule with a chick to add to the list.

After a well-earned rest here, we proceeded on to the Palacio del Rey, and turned south to enjoy an absolutely wonderful picnic in a very remote part of the park, completely surrounded by nature. The picnic site was a building which overlooked a nearby nest of Spanish Imperial Eagle. We were close enough to view the adult on the nest during our picnic. It was a most idyllic setting.

After this delightful feast we continued our day by slowly returning to our hotel, bird watching all time.

The birds were coming thick and fast, and there were regular stops along the way to enjoy them. We left our guides, and then made a late afternoon trip to El Acebuche, south of El Rocio, where we enjoyed very close views of Azure-winged Magpies, and excellent views over the nearby pools. Unfortunately, the hoped-for Crested Coot failed to put in an appearance so we headed back to the hotel and reflected on a stunning day's bird watching over dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 13th May

Today dawned clear and sunny. After breakfast, we met up again with our guide Abel, and our first destination was the nearby town of Niebla. Here, we enjoyed lovely views of the Lesser Kestrels which nest colonially in the castle walls. We had such good views; we were even able to see clearly the pale claws on the feet of the females – a feature which distinguishes females of this species from female Common Kestrel.

After admiring these birds, we headed to Bollullos where we found a singing male Rufous Bush-robin in its typical vineyard habitat. We were pleased to see this species as it is a difficult one to find. Not for the first time on the trip, local knowledge paid dividends.

Then it was on to a place near Hinojos where we were able to observe a Black-shouldered Kite devouring a prey item in a cork oak. We could even make out the red eye of this truly beautiful bird of prey. There were a number of other birds in support here, including Corn Buntings and a very confiding Western Olivaceous Warbler which stayed still long enough for everyone to get excellent telescope views.

Leaving this area behind, we headed to Dehesa de Abajo for another amazing lunch, set on a hill overlooking a lake and watching the densest breeding colony of White Storks in Spain – nests and birds were everywhere it seemed! A remarkable surprise was a flock of 7 Common Cranes which flew overhead beyond the limit of binocular identification, but whose identity was confirmed with the telescope.

A walk to the lake after lunch was followed by a drive to Veta de Palma, another area generally ‘off limits’ to visiting birders. Here, we were treated to an astonishing number of birds, mainly thousands of Black-winged Stilts, Avocets and Greater Flamingos. These were supplemented by no less than 4 Marbled Ducks, Whimbrel, many hundreds of Black Terns in full breeding dress, and a Lesser Short-toed Lark which showed its distinguishing features very well.

This area of fish farms and pools is clearly a major attraction to birds and it was with a sense of disappointment that we eventually had to leave to return to El Rocío. A couple of drake Garganey and a single Short-toed Eagle softened the blow as we left, however.

A few keen clients then joined me for an attempt to hear (and see) Red-necked Nightjar, after dinner. Unfortunately, the wind had got up during the afternoon and the temperature of the day had fallen, both conspiring to make this an unsuccessful attempt.

Day 4

Monday 14th May

Today we made the long trip to the east side of the Guadalquivir River to the town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda and the adjacent Bonanza salt pans and lake.

The Donana National Park means that we had to drive around the north of the park and cross the river at Seville. On the way to Sanlúcar we encountered four male Montagu’s Harriers whilst a group of Griffon Vultures flew over us on their way to the Donana National Park.

We entered the salt pans and were soon looking at groups of passage waders in summer plumage, from the makeshift hides formed by the mini buses. Redshanks, Curlew Sandpipers, Sanderlings and Knot were feeding side by side, allowing excellent opportunities to study their identification features. More Flamingos, Black-winged Stilts and Gull-billed Terns were seen, whilst three Slender-billed Gulls, a family of Sardinian Warblers and four Collared Pratincoles added to the interest.

We drove to a freshwater lake nearby for a picnic lunch, and, whilst dodging the mosquitoes, we marvelled at the breeding colony of Little and Cattle Egrets in a colony in front of the hide, whilst a noisy Great Reed Warbler was singing for all he was worth even closer, offering great views. However, the highlight was undoubtedly a group of six White-headed Duck, hiding in the reeds at the far side of the lake. This is the rarest duck in Europe, and was a good find.

We called in at a freshwater lake near El Rocio on our way back to the hotel, and although no new birds were seen, we had a lovely walk in superb conditions.

After dinner, one client came with me for another try for Red-necked Nightjar, and at exactly midnight, we were successful at last, at Acebron. A great way to finish the day!

Day 5

Tuesday 15th May

Our final morning was spent at the Acebron reserve, close to El Rocio. It was a delightful walk, and once again we met a completely new habitat from what we had already found on the trip so far. It has been this variety of habitats which contributed to the large number of bird species we have seen, and which makes the Donana such a special place to visit.

The final new bird, appropriately enough, was a singing Iberian Chiffchaff. I had suggested this species as a possibility at the beginning of the week, and we were all able to enjoy this bird. Its song is very different from the more familiar Chiffchaff in the UK. Ironically for me, the last one I had seen was a bird singing in Norwich a week earlier!

We walked around the forest track and ended up at the Palacio, where we walked up to the roof and had a wonderful view over the countryside.

We then bade farewell to Abel, our excellent guide, and made our way back to Seville and our flight home. All clients had seen their target bird species.

Although no Lynx was seen, this trip has nonetheless been a very successful one, enjoyed in excellent weather. I thank you for your excellent company.

Bird List

	Common name	Scientific name	TL	May			
				12	13	14	15
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		8	4	1	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4	2		
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		1	4		
4	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		3	2	6	
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		100	50	150	
6	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		1	3		
7	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		3		1	
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		20	30	50	
9	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		1			
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		50	20	2	
11	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		20	10		
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		100	400	30	25
13	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		20	100	20	
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		400			
15	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>		500	1000	600	
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		20	200		
17	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		1	3	3	
18	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			1		
19	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>				6	
20	Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>			4		
21	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>			2		
22	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		6	60	30	
23	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		5	30	30	10
24	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		200	500	100	20
25	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		2	2		
26	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		50	1	10	
27	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			3	4	
28	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		2	3	1	
29	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			3		
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	2	3	
31	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca adalberti</i>		1			
32	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		1	2	3	2
33	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		4	1		
34	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		4	2		
35	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			4		
36	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>			1		
37	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			7		
38	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1	1	1	
39	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>			1		
40	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		4	1	3	1
41	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		30	200	10	1
42	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>			1	1	
43	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		50	500	100	
44	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		1	1000	60	
45	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>		60		4	
46	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		300	50	60	
47	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		1			
48	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			4	8	
49	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		20	7		

				May			
	Common name	Scientific name	TL	12	13	14	15
50	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		2			
51	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		2		1	
52	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				20	
53	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			2	7	
54	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>				8	
55	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		10	8	30	
56	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			1		
57	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			2		
58	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			1		
59	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			1		
60	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		4	2	100	
61	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		2			
62	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		4	2		
63	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>			3	2	
64	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>			50		
65	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>			7	10	
66	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>		200	100		
67	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>			15	20	
68	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>		2	100	10	10
69	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>		300	50	60	30
70	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		3			
71	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		10			
72	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		10	4	6	2
73	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		1		1	
74	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		1	1	1	1
75	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1			
76	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>				3	
77	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>			100	20	10
78	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		20	100	50	20
79	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		15	8	1	1
80	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					2
81	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		20	10	5	5
82	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		10			
83	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>			1		
84	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		4	3		
85	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			1		
86	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		6	10	5	1
87	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>		2			
88	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		150	200	70	20
89	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		500	500	400	500
90	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		20	6	20	
91	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1			1
92	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		10			20
93	Rufous Bush-robin	<i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>			1		
94	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1			
95	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1	3	1
96	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>		2			
97	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		8	50	20	1
98	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		10	2		1
99	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		20		10	2
100	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>			1		

				May			
	Common name	Scientific name	TL	12	13	14	15
101	Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>			1		
102	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>					1
103	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		15	2	10	3
104	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus iberiae</i>					1
105	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1			
106	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		6			
107	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				1	
108	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>					2
109	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		4	2	4	2
110	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					1
111	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>				1	
112	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		2			5
113	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>			1		
114	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		8	15	8	4
115	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		60	200	20	2
116	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		10			
117	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		10	4	4	
118	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanopica</i>		20	3	8	1
119	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		50	300		
120	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				2	
121	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		1	2	1	
122	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		80	50	20	20
123	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			1		
124	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		2			1
125	Serín	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		6	10		1
126	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			2	2	
127	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		10	5	6	2
128	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		10	40	20	