

Spain - The Best of Coto Donana

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 15 April 2008



Azure-winged Magpie



The Donana Group



Crested Coot



Lesser Kestrels

Report & photos compiled by Dr Kevin Elsby



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Day 1

Friday 11th April

We left Gatwick a few minutes late and arrived at Seville just over two hours later and the group met up to continue the journey to our hotel for the trip, the Torunus at the wonderfully picturesque town of El Rocio. Entering El Rocio for the first time makes you think you are entering a scene from a spaghetti western. You half expect to see Clint Eastwood come round the next corner with a six shooter in his hand and a cigar in his mouth! The streets consist of sand and nothing else.

After quickly settling into our rooms, we had a late dinner, and talked about the plans for the holiday. Birds seen on the way from the airport were House Martin (in their hundreds at El Rocio), Barn Swallow, Hoopoe and two Azure-winged Magpies (the latter two species flying across the road in front of the minibus). There had been a lot of rain here, including a severe storm, just a few days ago so it will be interesting to see how this will affect the birds and mammals we see.

Day 2

Saturday 12th April

The day dawned calm and clear though with a chilly westerly breeze. We did some pre breakfast birding on the marshes adjacent to our hotel, and we saw Squacco Heron, hundreds of Common Coot, White Storks and a lot of Spoonbills. In addition the first Black Kites of the trip were spotted, as were a group of over 200 Whiskered Terns. A couple of Serins were serenading us outside the hotel in the Olive trees, but not to be outdone a male Great Reed Warbler was giving it his all in the nearby reed bed. After breakfast we drove west to the marshes of Odiel, near to the city of Huelva. We spent the majority of the day here, walking and driving around the series of salt pans and estuarine habitat that is so attractive to birds.

Interspersed with the birdwatching was a picnic lunch taken nearly at the end of the road along this southern bank of the Odiel.

Birds were numerous both in terms of species and absolute numbers in many cases. We first got our 'eye in' on a flock of a couple of hundred Greater Flamingos. At the entrance to the cafe car park at the beginning of the day we pulled over to look at the roadside pond and had a flock of over 100 Black-winged Stilts, that most graceful wader which has the longest legs in relation to its body size of any bird.

We spent much of the time scanning the mudflats which were becoming exposed on the receding tide and were rewarded with views of a nice selection of waders, many of which were busy stocking up on fat reserves before continuing their punishing journey to Arctic breeding grounds. These included Dunlin, Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper and a handful of Curlew Sandpiper. Several Greenshank, Sanderling, Grey Plover and Turnstone made up the rest, with numerous Ringed Plovers at least some of which would probably breed locally.

We found two close Ospreys, and then, over lunch, a fantastic Short-toed Eagle hovered above us in a clear blue sky, looking for snakes on the ground below.

We saw a selection of terns including a single large Caspian Tern - always a very impressive species to encounter with its bright scarlet dagger of a bill.

A moment of humour was provided when a Grey Heron was seen to catch an eel and was then chased by another Grey Heron, but which then lost its prize to a much larger White Stork. The stork proceeded to eat the eel live which was seen to wriggle in the storks' 'throat' as it slid down!

In the early afternoon we decamped to the town of Manzanilla where we had superb views of the Lesser Kestrel colony in the church tower. They gave us a stunning performance, perfectly lit by the strong afternoon sun, and we were close enough to see the pale claws of the females in the telescope - an important feature to separate them from female Common Kestrel. This was a species enjoyed by all, and one 'eagle eyed' member of the party then spotted a Moorish Gecko on the wooden support of the bell in the belfry of the tower.

Enthusiasm was still high as we next made our way to Chucena, where we hoped to see Black-shouldered Kite. This is still a hard bird to see in Europe, but it was not long before the cry went up "Black-shouldered Kite!". One was perched in the top of a tree in full view and all saw it in the 'scope. A few Bee Eaters also chose this moment to fly over the party. Then, a male Montagu's Harrier (the 5th for the day) put in an appearance.

At this point, we decided to return to El Rocio to see if we could find either the Sacred or Bald Ibis, both of which had been spotted near the lake. We were unsuccessful with both on this occasion, but were more than compensated with a flock of over 50 very confiding Collared Pratincoles - the first to be seen in the Donana this year.

Altogether this was an encouraging start to our stay in Andalucia.

Day 3

Sunday 13th April

The day started with the usual pre breakfast look over the marsh outside of the hotel. It really is ideally situated, since one can almost fall out of bed and be looking at one of the most welcome sights in European birding, with a host of birds making use of the freshwater lake. We began with White Storks, Great Reed Warbler, Serin, Spoonbill and Grey Heron. This morning we also added two Little Bitterns, both males. They kept up a their somewhat monotonous 'song' which sounded just like a distant dog bark, and has which has also been likened to a suppressed human cough. Either way, it was a good bird to see.

After breakfast, we had another go for the Sacred Ibis and Bald Ibis, which had turned up here a couple of days ago, and which had been frequenting an area just behind the hotel. We had tried for them last night, in rapidly fading light, but were unsuccessful. This time, we were immediately rewarded with close views of 7 Sacred Ibis and a single Bald Ibis. The Bald Ibis and one of the Sacred Ibises were ringed. Details of the ring combinations were noted and photographs were obtained. At this stage, it looks as if both species could be genuine vagrants, perhaps deflected north from Africa in the recent storms which hit this part of southern Europe and North Africa recently. Some research after returning to the UK should 'iron out' any uncertainties, but for now we were grateful for seeing them both. We also had excellent views of Bee Eaters and a couple of Squacco Herons.

We reluctantly moved on from here to spend the rest of the day east of El Rocio, travelling to the Corredor Verde and on to the Veta la Palma in the Parque Nacional de Donana. We had our lunch in beautiful weather overlooking Spain's largest colony of breeding White Storks at Dehesa de Abajo.

The nearby lake held our first Black-necked Grebes, resplendent in full breeding dress. They were accompanied by Red-crested Pochards and Great Crested Grebes. At one point, a Black Kite gave great views, tearing a prey item up and eating it. Initially, the leader announced that the prey was a Yellow Wagtail. Later it became obvious that it was a fish! Oops! Blame it on the heat from the sun!

Before arriving at our lunch spot, we had paused to see a mixed colony of House and Spanish Sparrows in the 'understory' of a White Stork nest. A sharp eyed member of the team then spotted a pair of Tree Sparrows in a distant tree. Added to this were stunning views of a pale phase Booted Eagle, Hoopoe and Azure-winged Magpie.

After lunch we travelled to Veta la Palma and spent the rest of the day, taking our time driving around the fish ponds, periodically stopping and getting out of the mini buses to scan the water.

We had good views of both Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks, plenty of the Iberian race of Yellow Wagtail, Southern Grey Shrike, Red Kite, Spotted Redshank, Purple Heron, hundreds of Avocets and Black-winged Stilts, noisy Gull-billed Terns and over a thousand Greater Flamingos. A lucky few saw a single Purple Heron, but all had excellent views of the numerous Night Herons which we passed.

Try as we might, however, our two main target species, White-headed Duck and Marbled Teal both eluded us, possibly due to the high water level after the recent heavy rains. We did, though, see a single Caspian Tern in much better light than yesterday, and although it had been a long day, we had all had a thoroughly enjoyable time. We rounded things off with a single Little Owl on a telegraph wire as we returned to El Rocio.

Day 4

Monday 14th April

Today we drove to the east and north east parts of the Coto Donana National Park, using two land rovers with the essential 4 wheel drive. The sand tracks, dotted regularly with pools of deep water and mud from the recent heavy rain, made the use of a minibus a non-starter. Indeed, we learned that last week this part of the park was inaccessible, even with four wheel drive. We were very lucky.

We first of all headed east out of El Rocio, and entered an area of pine forest, with the dwarf palm, Europe's only native palm. We hoped to see Lynx here, but were unfortunately unsuccessful. Carrying on, we travelled through different ecosystems, initially forest where mastic tree, cork oak, umbrella pine and ash were to be found, then to a wetter part where the underlying substrate is not sand but clay. This was much more open country, and few trees are in evidence. In fact, you could see for miles, when looking south from here, towards the Atlantic Ocean. We came across a couple of Red Deer, then several Black Kites before we saw another Little Owl and a hovering Black-shouldered Kite.

Continuing on our way, we got out and walked frequently. At one point we found a Great Spotted Cuckoo which was looking for food along the bank of a canal. We all got good views of this lovely bird. Other new birds included several Calandra Larks, showing the distinctive dark marks at either side of the breast, as well as a couple of Savi's Warblers, giving their distinctive high pitched reeling song. We managed to get the 'scopes on a confiding individual for all to see.

We then paused to observe the heron colony at the Jose Antonio Valverde visitor centre. Purple Herons, Little Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Night Herons and Glossy Ibis were nesting in large numbers in colonies of mixed species and it was a spectacular sight

Once again, the weather had been very kind to us, with mainly blue skies, light wind and warm temperatures. We made our way to lunch at the delightfully situated Coto del Rey, in the extreme north east of the park. Here we enjoyed a beautiful lunch in simply stunning surroundings. Frustratingly, the Imperial Eagle had chosen this year not to nest in its usual tree which is visible from the dining table. However, after we had finished eating, one was spotted nearby sitting on an electricity pylon. Even though we were several hundred yards away, it was clear this was a seriously impressive raptor. It is the rarest eagle in the world behind the Harpy Eagle.

After lunch, we made our way slowly back to El Rocio, arriving about 4pm. We then had an unsuccessful attempt to see Penduline Tits below the bridge just south of El Rocio. So, we moved further south to the reception centre and boardwalk at El Acebuche. Here, we saw Stonechats, plenty of confiding Azure-winged Magpies, and a fine male Golden Oriole. We visited one of the hides on the boardwalk, and heard Nightingales and more Savi's Warblers.

After an early dinner, some of the group then went to listen for Red-necked Nightjars. A special bird of southern Spain, they winter in Africa, and it was doubtful if they were back in Spain yet. However, 'he who dares, wins', and for us it was good news as one bird was seen in the car headlights as we drove into El Acebuche, and it then started to call and circled the minibus a couple of times, being picked out just above the horizon in the moonlit sky. An excellent way to finish the day!

Day 5

Tuesday 15 April

This was our last day in Spain, and in order to maximise the short time we had before we had to return to Seville, we went to Acebron, where we had a walk around the boardwalk in the lovely forest of pines and cork oaks. We had the place to ourselves and it was a most atmospheric walk as Nightingales were in full song from what seemed like every available perch. Normally thought of as shy and difficult to see, one or two were sufficiently brazen to show themselves long enough for all of us to see. How can such a wonderful songster look so drab?

Carrying on around the path, we found two Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and several more Siskins. A male Blackcap sang from the top of a cork oak, while we were pleased to see two Iberian Chiffchaffs, recently promoted to specific status, having previously been considered a race of Common Chiffchaff. They were both in song, and we agreed that the song is nothing like the song of its 'cousin', a familiar summer visitor to the UK.

A couple of Little Egrets were seen on a nest, and the damage made by wild boar was evident in the mud below the boardwalk in the damper area of the forest.

One member of the group had brief views of a Short-toed Treecreeper. This is the Treecreeper species which occurs in Donana. A pale phase Booted Eagle was flushed from the top of a tree and there were several Chaffinches heard.

We managed to complete the circuit before we had to return to the minibuses, and were able to marvel at the Palacio del Acebron. We wondered of the parties which must once have been held on this beautiful building, lying as it does in the quietest part of the forest.

Too soon, we boarded the mini buses to return to Seville Airport. We had seen some excellent birds and had been lucky enough to visit some superb habitat, much of which is 'off limits' to the general public.

The trip bird total was 129 species. All tour participants had seen new species, and all had had a wonderful time. The holiday was made much more enjoyable by the way the team gelled and shared each other's enthusiasm. In addition, we had some excellent guides (Jesus, Fernando and Abel), and everyone we met was, without exception, very friendly and helpful.

Thank you for all your help.

Bird List

	Common name	Scientific name	April				
			11	12	13	14	15
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			6	2	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4	4	20	
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			6		
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			2	1	
5	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			34	40	
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		30	50	500	
7	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		2	2	6	1
8	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>			2	1	
9	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		12	20	150	2
10	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>			2		
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		12	20	20	
12	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>			3	20	
13	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	10	200	150	100	
14	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	1	100	80	100	6
15	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		5	2	500	
16	Sacred ibis	<i>Threskionis aethiopicus</i>			7		
17	Bald Ibis	<i>Geronticus eremita</i>			1	1	
18	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>		150	1000	100	50
19	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			1	3	
20	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		20	50	50	1
21	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		8	30	6	
22	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			150		
23	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		6	100	30	
24	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		20	200	100	
25	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		12	80	100	
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			33	1	
27	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			1	12	
28	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		8			
29	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		8	20		
30	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		3		1	
31	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	4	3	
32	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca adalberti</i>				1	
33	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		1	4	4	1
34	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1		2	
35	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		2	2		
36	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	6	6	1
37	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		12			
38	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1	1	12	
39	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		1			
40	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		6	6	6	
41	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		150	500	500	50
42	Crested Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>		2		1	
43	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		1	1	4	
44	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	2	100	300	1000	
45	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			500		
46	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>		54	50	40	
47	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		250	300	1	
48	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		6		5	
49	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		12	4		

	Common name	Scientific name	April				
			11	12	13	14	15
50	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				8	
51	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		10	1		
52	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>			4		
53	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		25			
54	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		6			
55	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		50			
56	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		10			
57	Curlew	<i>Numerius arquata</i>		6			
58	Whimbrel	<i>Numerius phaeopus</i>		10			
59	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		100			
60	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		50			
61	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		50	20		
62	Sotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		1	1		
63	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		6	6		
64	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			4	1	
65	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>			2		
66	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		3	1		
67	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		1	300		
68	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>		150	50	2	
69	Lesser Black-baced Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		6			
70	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>		30			
71	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>			20	6	
72	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>		30	2		
73	Caspian Tern	<i>Sterna caspia</i>		1	1		
74	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>		150	150	300	
75	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>				1	
76	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		4	2	6	
77	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		1			
78	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	2	1	1
79	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		2	2	1	2
80	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>				1	
81	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1	1	
82	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>				2	
83	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	6	10	150	1000	2
84	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		10	30	30	30
85	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	2	6	6	1
86	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>					2
87	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		30	30	100	2
88	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			6		
89	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>			4		
90	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				6	
91	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		150	100	1000	2
92	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>		2	1	6	
93	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		1000	500	1000	100
94	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	10	1000	1000	1000	500
95	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	4		
96	Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		6	30	20	
97	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					2
98	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>				3	20
99	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					1
100	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>				3	

			April				
	Common name	Scientific name	11	12	13	14	15
101	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	1		1	1
102	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>				3	
103	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		6	30	30	
104	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			3	3	3
105	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		6	6	6	
106	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		1	2	2	
107	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		1		2	
108	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				2	1
109	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		6	3	10	2
110	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus iberiae</i>					2
111	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>			2		
112	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			1	6	1
113	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				1	2
114	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					1
115	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			1		
116	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		3	5	12	5
117	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	15	100	100	100	30
118	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>				1	
119	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		30	20	50	2
120	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanopica</i>		20	20	30	10
121	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			3	12	
122	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>				6	
123	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			2		
124	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	10	50	200	200	30
125	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			6		
126	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				6	2
127	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		3	2	12	10
128	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		6	6	12	4
129	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		6	200	200	2