

Spain - The Best of Coto Donana

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 16 April 2013



Collared Pratincole



European Bee-eater



Iberian Chiffchaff



Purple Heron

Report & images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Introduction

At a time when foreign travel was still a remote dream for most people, the account of the expedition in Guy Mountfort's classic book 'Portrait of a Wilderness' made exciting reading and inspired ambitions to visit this remarkable area. The aim of the tour was to visit as many habitats in Doñana area and with that a good section of the wildlife. We were not to be disappointed...

Day 1

Friday 12th April

London Gatwick – Seville – El Rocio. El Acebuche

We started very early today in order to get our flight from London Gatwick to Seville. Nevertheless, the efforts of being awake since very early morning didn't matter as we all were really looking forward to starting this tour. We finally arrived into a bright and sunny Seville, with a pleasant temperature of 20° C, and, as it was off peak time, it was pretty easy driving through the city heading towards El Rocio.

First of all we spotted a large group of European Swifts by the airport, followed by many Black Kites and Common Buzzards. A few more birds such as Azure-winged Magpie and White Stork were seen along the main road and nearer to El Rocio, where we finally arrived around 13:00. We took our assigned rooms while enjoying the local nibbles and drinks they provided, and after a settle-in break, we drove a short distance to the area of El Acebuche where we enjoyed a tasty picnic lunch amongst Bee-eaters, Hoopoes and Azure-winged Magpies! The weather was pretty warm and still sunny. After lunch, we took a walk through the visitor's centre where the board walk offered great birds such as nesting Red-rumped Swallows, Spotless Starling, Azure-winged Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe and the very colourful European Bee-eater.

The hides offered interesting waterfowl such as Common and Red-crested Pochards, Mallard, Little and Great-crested Grebes, and Mallard. We also enjoyed watching Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Savi's Warbler, House Martin, Barn Swallow, Eurasian Stonechat, Grey Heron, Little and Cattle Egrets, amongst others. We decided to drive back to our hotel in EL Rocio, have a quick check of the marshes (La Marisma) located just behind the hotel which produced Eurasian Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Gadwall and Whiskered Tern, before walking back to our hotel to freshen up just as a shower - then some drinks, checklist and dinner!

Day 2

Saturday 13th April

La Rocina – El Acebrón Palace

After breakfast, we drove just a few minutes away from our hotel to La Rocina. This is part of the Donana National Park and offers a variety of wooden trails, perfect to locate a good sample of bird species of the area. We started our walk from the car park along the board walk having close views of Short-toed Treecreeper and Serin. Walking further on the first hide, the noisy Nightingales were singing from all over the bushes and hedges. Grey Herons, Eurasian Spoonbills and a few Glossy Ibis landed right in front of us while we walked into the marshes. Also Cetti's, Reed Warblers were calling away, and we managed to get some great views of Woodchat Shrike, Black Kite, Whiskered Terns, Little Egret, Purple Heron and an elusive Savi's Warbler. We continued walking on the board walk and changing the habitat a little bit as we got into the scrub sandy or semi dune area; this is a very interesting habitat as the local Mediterranean scrub blends with the marshy territory bringing to us very interesting species such as Thekla Lark, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, Serin, European Bee-eaters, Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture and a very distant Marsh Harrier. We checked the last hide but we saw nothing new in terms of birdlife.

Lunch time was approaching so we decided to walk back to the car park along the board walk and going through many flitting warblers and noisy Nightingales, until a melodious call caught my attention - it was the lovely call of a Golden Oriole! We tried to locate him along the ash trees, and suddenly he perched beautifully in front of us for a few seconds and then he perched in the rear branches of the tree, and still visible so we managed to set up the scopes on this beautiful bird! Well, what a good pre-lunch tick!

We finally got to the car park and drove to the planned picnic spot just by the El Acebron Palace. After enjoying our lunch around the palace, we walked along the trail which links the Palace gardens with the car park, a beautiful Mediterranean forest. In spite the hot afternoon, we managed to find a few new and interesting species for our list such as Crested Tit and Pied Flycatcher; plus, European Bee-eaters, Short-toed Treecreeper, Blue, Great and Long-tailed Tits, Chaffinch, Serin and European Swifts gliding actively around! After spending several hours in the field already, we decided that it was time to drive back to El Rocio for a break and to get ready for another lovely supper!

Day 3

Sunday 19th April

Doñana National Park (Isla Mayor, Valverde visitor's centre, Dehesa de Abajo)

We started early today, ready to explore the north-eastern bound of Donana National Park. After breakfast, we left el Rocio heading to Villamarique de la Condesa where we made a stop for bread.

We then entered the national park through Isla Mayor, watching a lot White Storks, Grey Herons and hundreds of Black Kites. The first stop brought a flock of Spanish Sparrows and a several unstoppable Fan-tailed Warblers (Zitting Cisticola) displaying right above our heads! We continued our drive watching at times some Crested and Short-toed Larks jumping in and out the track from the hedges, until a group of great birds made us stop: they were a large group of Collared Pratincoles in great shape and also displaying, which it was quite a show to watch. A few metres away in the same field, a Greater Short-toed Lark was spotted too, together with a Lesser Short-toed Lark not far from there. Very excited by the birds seen, we continued driving a very short distance and parked the vans in order to start walking along the track enjoying the marismas where hundreds of Glossy Ibis were noisy and very active, nesting in the *Tamarix spp.* trees, sharing the hedges with beautiful Purple Herons and the very noisy Great Reed Warbler, both we also enjoyed watching! We continued walking under a warm sun, and watching many birds such as Red-crested Pochard, Greater Flamingos, Eurasian Spoonbill, Iberian Yellow Warbler, Purple Gallinule, Woodchat Shrike, Corn Bunting, Northern Wheatear, and a perched Short-toed Snake Eagle. We also had fantastic views of Lesser Kestrels copulating and flying around an old building where they usually nest.

As the day was getting warmer, we continued our drive towards the J. Valverde visitor's centre where we had a good break while watching very close Greater Flamingos and zillions of nesting Glossy Ibis, Cattle and Little Egrets which looked like decorated Christmas trees amongst the flooded marisma! Black-crowned Night-Herons, Avocets, Purple Heron, Common Coot, Little and Great-crested Grebes were seen here too. Shortly after this, we enjoyed our picnic lunch at the car park and soon after that we continued to check other areas of the marismas. We had great views of Common Redstart, Savi's Warbler, Common Sandpiper, and lovely views of Black-necked Grebe. We continued driving and watching a few interesting birds on the way such as Common Redstart, Winchat, and cracking views of Short-toed Eagle. Another good bird we found along the track was a very cooperative Great Spotted Cuckoo which we put very quickly in the scope. Lots of Grey and Purple Herons, Black Kites, Common Kestrels, White Stork and Common Buzzards, and others, were seen along the road.

We then decided to have a final stop of the day – and heading to El Rocio – at La Dehesa de Abajo which was full of water but quite quiet in terms of birds. A few Common and Red-crested Pochards, Mallard, Greater Flamingos, Little and Great-crested Grebe were seen. We got back to El Rocio to relax during the late afternoon and later to enjoy the delicious local nibbles, drinks and superb supper!

Day 4

Monday 15th April

Doñana National Park (Coto del Rey, La Garvija)

Another beautiful day in the lovely El Rocio! After breakfast, we boarded 4x4 vans and set off with our park guide into the core area of Doñana National Park, right along the La Raya Real, the track which takes you to the heart of the park. We firstly searched carefully for Iberian Lynx along a very pristine area of Mediterranean forest, but despite our efforts nothing seemed to be around, just a lot of Black Kites, a nice pale morph Booted Eagle, Azure-winged Magpie and a very lonely Turtle Dove perched on an electric wire. We kept driving along the track and entering the border area between the marisma and the Mediterranean forest, checking man-made rabbit burrows built using eucalyptus stumps which allow them to breed well. Three Little Owls were seen perched right on top of the stumps here, which was a good tick for our trip list!

More birds such as Skylark, Crested Lark, Eurasian Kestrel and Griffon Vulture were also seen along the drive. After checking out the man-made rabbit burrows, we continued driving back to La Raya Real (main track) and drove into another restricted area known as Hierba Buena where we had a nice walk, making a loop around the lovely dehesa or traditional Mediterranean forest. Here, two lovely Booted Eagles were seen flying in and out from a big old cork-oak tree where they had a nest, which also had White Stork nests in it too! We continued our walk watching several Woodchat Shrikes and also Sardinian Warbler, Common Redstart, Common Chiffchaff, Stonechat, a few Green Finch and Goldfinch, and a very nice Isabelline's (Olivaceous) Warbler in one of the trees nearby. Lunch time was getting there so we got in our vans and drove a short distance where our picnic lunch was waiting for us already set up at La Garvija, a former rangers little house, adapted to host birders and wildlife lovers in this exclusive area of the park. We enjoyed a fantastic spread of local food and drinks that we enjoyed a lot!

After lunch, we started to drive back towards El Rocio in order to have a break as it was about 30°C already, so it was time to cool down a bit. Some of us opted to go for a drink outside the hotel's restaurant while others retired to their rooms to rest before going out again on an optional excursion just before dinner. Almost the whole group was up for it so we set off to La Rocina to check the boardwalk trails and a couple of hides. Our visit was paid off as we had fantastic views at our arrival of an Iberian Chiffchaff not far from the car park and along the board walk nearby. We had fantastic views of this elusive and hard-to-identify little bird. We continued our walk entering to the stone pine area, watching for signs of Wild Boar activity in the area; when suddenly, a group of five Wild Boar – three youngsters and two adults, including a massive male – were spotted while they were resting amongst the bushes and trees nearby, giving us great views of all of them, especially great views of the male who stood up in front of us for a good twenty seconds! It was good to see them. We also found a nice Short-toed Treecreeper taking some nesting material and food to its nest. We then arrived at one of the hides where some interesting birds such as Purple Gallinule, European Reed Warbler, Savi's Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Grey and Purple Herons, Whiskered Tern, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, Red-crested and Common Pochards, Glossy Ibis, amongst others were seen. We saw the same variety of birds from the second hide, having had great views of Crested Tit and Nightingale on the way.

We had a great time here and it was time to head back to the hotel in order to gather together again to do our checklist of the day and then to enjoy our last delicious dinner together. After dinner, and just when dusk was nearly there, we got in the vans again and drove to La Rocina in order to look for Red-necked Nightjar. We arrived at a suitable area and immediately had a good response from a pair which flew right above us and in front, wow, what a great surprise that was! Not happy with just that, we drove a short distance along the track and tried again. This time, a male was heard calling away and he replied very well to our call and came very close to us giving us a fantastic show! What a way to finish our last day of the trip!

Day 5

Tuesday 16th April

El Rocio – Seville airport

The southern shore of the marshes was covered by a dense strip of mist this morning. After an early breakfast, we checked out of our hotel and drive up from El Rocio heading towards Seville; a lovely male Montague's Harrier, Azure-winged Magpies and a few European Bee-eaters were spotted, alongside lots European Swifts, House Martins and Barn Swallows around the airport.

We arrived on time at Seville's airport and after wishing a very warm “Adios amigos!”, we were then ready to start our journey back home after a great trip, with plenty of good moments, adventures and new friendships!

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Scientific name	Common name	April				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓		✓	
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			✓		
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		
5	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		✓	✓	✓	
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		✓			
8	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>			✓	✓	
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
15	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓		✓	✓	
18	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			✓	✓	
19	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
23	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>			✓	✓	✓
24	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca (adalberti)</i>	✓				
27	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	✓	✓		✓	
28	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
29	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓	✓
30	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			✓		
31	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓	
32	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		h	✓	✓	
34	Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>			✓	✓	
35	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			✓		
37	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>			✓		
38	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓			
40	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>			✓		
41	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>			✓		
42	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓		✓	✓
44	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>					
46	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Scientific name	Common name	April				
			12	13	14	15	16
47	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				✓	
48	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		h			
49	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>			✓		
50	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		h			
51	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				✓	
52	Red-necked Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>				✓	
53	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		✓			
54	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
55	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				h	
56	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>		h		h	
59	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		h			
60	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓		✓
61	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		✓			
62	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			✓		
63	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>			✓		
64	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	
65	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		✓			
66	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	✓	✓		✓	
67	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	h				
70	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>	✓		✓	✓	
71	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓		✓	
72	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	h	✓		✓	
73	Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>			✓	✓	
74	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			✓		
75	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	✓	✓		✓	
76	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓	✓	
77	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>	✓	✓		✓	
79	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	h		✓	h	
80	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	h	h	h	h	
81	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓		
82	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>			✓	✓	
83	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	h	h	h	✓	
84	Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Hippolais pallida</i>				✓	
85	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓			
86	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			✓		
87	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		h			
88	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓		✓	
89	Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		✓			
90	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			h		
91	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		h		✓	
92	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>				✓	
93	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>			✓		
94	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓			
95	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>		✓		✓	

	Scientific name	Common name	April				
			12	13	14	15	16
96	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	h	✓		✓	
97	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓		✓	
98	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
99	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓		✓	
100	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓				
101	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		✓			
104	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			✓	✓	
107	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓			
108	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>				✓	✓
109	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			✓		
111	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	h	✓		✓	
112	Serín	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
113	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	h	✓		✓	
114	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	

Mammals

1	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓		✓	
2	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓	
3	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				✓	

Other Taxa

1	Red-eared Slider	<i>Trachemys scripta elegans</i>		✓			
2	Striped-necked Terrapin	<i>Mauremys sinensis</i>	✓				
3	European Terrapin	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>	✓				
4	Red-tailed (Spiny-footed) Lizard	<i>Acanthodactylus erythrurus</i>	✓				
5	Large Psammmodromus Lizard	<i>Psammmodromus algirus</i>		✓			