Extremadura in Spring – A Beginner Birdwatching tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th - 13th April 2022







European Roller



Great Bustard



Griffon Vulture

Tour report & images by Martin Pitt



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Summary

Naturetrek's Extremadura in Spring is specifically designed to bring the wide range of species of this wonderful part of Spain to a beginners audience. From our base on the steppes north of Trujillo we focused on the full range of habitats and the species special to each. After a dry winter it was good to see that local rains had at least 'greened' the steppes and plenty of singing and territorial behaviour was noted. As always, many of summer migrants had already arrived and it was good to see that the Montagu's Harriers appeared in good numbers after low numbers in previous years. Although the focus is undoubtedly on birds, other taxa were not entirely ignored and most noteworthy was the good showing of eight species of orchids amongst the plentiful flowers.

The weather was variable but with winds generally from the south it was clear that migrants were arriving almost on a daily basis. Garganey and Osprey were just passing through, while the large numbers of Bee-eaters would be a mix of local breeders and those heading further north. European Rollers were arriving during our visit and other species had only just arrived including the charismatic Black-eared Wheatear. Winter visitors had not wholly departed and we found Eurasian Siskin, Merlin and Eurasian Wigeon later in the season than usual. Overall, we recorded 130 species of birds and with these were most of the local specialities; Great & Little Bustard, Black-bellied & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Iberian Magpie, Black Stork, Griffon, Egyptian & Cinereous Vulture, and the Spanish Imperial Eagle all featured on the day lists. Other highlights were the owls including European Eagle and Scops Owls, both at day roosts, and a plethora of waterbirds including the bizarre Western Swamphen. Together they provide a wealth of wonderful memories of this unique part of Spain.

Day 1

Thursday 7th April

Madrid and drive to Extremadura

The flight from Heathrow to Madrid was late in departing, although most of this delay was made up on the way southwards. Those close to windows were surprised with the amount of snow on the mountains to the north of the city, but we landed in bright and sunny conditions and we completed the formalities and started our drive south-westwards. Unfortunately, luck was not with us and we hit two serious holdups meaning that the transfer ran on. At least we did a bit of birding from the vehicles and started seeing species that soon would be familiar to us. More excitingly we also saw our first raptors, with Black Kite, Booted Eagle and Montagu's Harrier all giving tantalising glimpses of what was to come.

We arrived at Casa Rural las Canteras after 8pm and were welcomed by both the clattering of bills from the nesting White Storks and the wailing of Stone-Curlews. Our host, Pedro, showed us to our rooms and we met up with the last two members of our group, before sitting down to our first meal together and discussing the week ahead.

Day 2 Friday 8th April

Las Canteras & Parque Nacional de Monfragüe

Breakfast at 8am was the first of the pattern we would follow daily and everyone was ready to head out for a walk at 9am. A short stroll around the plains around the hotel gave an introduction to the more plentiful species.

Corn Buntings were everywhere and their jangling sounds were to be become a familiar backdrop where-ever we went. The walk also gave the first opportunity to try out the most difficult of birding activities – lark identification. All brown and streaky, their voices are the best way to tell them apart and nuances of 'happy'

versus 'sad' i.e. Thekla



Rio Almonte, Monfragüe

After an hour we headed north to the famous Parque Nacional de Monfragüe, stopping just inside the park boundary on the Almonte river valley. The river itself was garlanded with Water-crowsfoot and Rock Narcissus. A mixture of hirundines circled the river, for many their first of the year, with familiar Barn Swallows and House Martins being joined by Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins. A Purple Heron flew over and we spent time with the birds along the fence line; again familiar Stonechats were joined by more exotic Woodchat Shrikes. A Short-toed Eagle hovered overhead hunting for snakes and lizards on the dry hillsides. We later stopped by the main river system to watch some vultures. A pair of Cinereous Vultures were intent on building a nest in a tree and we watched them bring twigs.

The dull conditions continued and we weren't completely surprised to find a small party of Siskins at our picnic site, a species more likely in the depths of winter than now in spring. Portilla del Tietar is well known in birding circles and we spent some time watching the vultures. Here the Cinereous and Griffons were also joined by the endangered Egyptian Vulture, all to the background sound of a singing Blue Rock Thrush. We had hoped for an Eagle, but perhaps more exciting was the roosting Eurasian Eagle Owl that a couple of Spanish birders showed the group.

Elated, we headed back to Peña Falcon, a highlight of any visit, but this needed to wait until we found a newly returned territorial Western Black-eared Wheatear that had chosen a length of road as its territory, often perching on the road signs to give it better vantage for its song post. Peña Falcon is a rock pinnacle, and now late in the

day it was a swirling mass of Vultures, riding the thermals high into the sky. Booted Eagles, Ravens and Kites joined the mix. Low on one of the cliffs, a Black Stork was incubating its eggs while more cliff loving species such as Rock Bunting, Black Redstart and more Blue Rock Thrushes were added to our burgeoning list.

We headed back to the Las Canteras after a long but fruitful day.

Day 3

Saturday 9th April

Trujillo and Alcollarin

With a wet start to the day, we headed to Trujillo for Lesser Kestrels that nest in the now disused bullring. After this we tried the nearby local park and here we were surprised to find a lone Mute Swan and a pair of confiding Garganey, the latter only scarce migrants in Extremadura.



Alcollarin reservoir

The reservoir of Alcollarin is about 30 mins drive to the southeast of Trujillo and most of the journey was in low cloud and rain, but arriving at our first stop by the dam the rain at stopped and a small party of Bee-eaters lifted our spirits. We spent a bit of time near the main dam. Amongst the hirundines we found our first Red-rumped Swallow and the vantage point gave views across the local orchards where a small party of Iberian Magpies played follow-my-leader. The water side showed the continuing lack of rain in Extremadura, with very low water levels. Still, we found parties of Great-crested Grebes and Gadwall before it was time to move on.

We headed to a small pool and despite the threat of rain had our picnic and then headed out on a short exploration. The area that used to be the bottom of the reservoir was flush with flowers following the recent spring showers. We soon found Woodchat Shrikes, Stonechats and even a Sardinian Warbler that sat up so

everyone could see. The Quails, on the other hand, stuck to the longer grass and despite calling refused to show themselves. The pool held a good mix of species. Male & female Marsh Harriers were constantly in the air and the dead trees held Great, Little & Cattle Egrets enabling good comparison of the three. On the water's edge a party of Spoonbills swept for food and Black-winged Stilts lived up to their name, the bright red long legs making identification simple.

We headed further around where the Spanish Lavender was in full bloom and the banks were covered in drifts of the blue flowers of Barbary Nut. For the first time, the clouds parted and the sun brought warmth to our wanderings. A walk along the stream flushed a Purple Heron, but of more surprise was an Osprey sitting in a dead tree - obviously a migrant pausing on its route northwards. Bee-eaters were all around us, but they wouldn't settle and with the weather threatening more rain we headed back to Las Canteras.

Day 4

Sunday 10th April

Steppes around Santa Marta de Magascar

With the forecast set warm & fair and breaking news that the Rollers had finally returned, we embarked on a full day in the steppes centred around Santa Marta de Magascar. The whole day was to the backdrop of a soundscape of singing Larks (Thekla's, Crested & Calandra) and the ever-present Com Buntings. Our first stop was the viewing hillock where we were soon able to scope two male Little Bustards, a species that has declined precipitously over the last decade. Montagu's Harriers were also around, another declining species that in some years is difficult to find but this year seemed to be present at almost every stop.

Moving on to La Cumbre, it was clear that the recent rain had resulted in a good flush of grass and the livestock drinking pools were full over a wide area. This latter point was important for our chances with Sandgrouse, as they had plenty of places to drink and we just hoped we were close to the right one. A distant party of Blackbellied made us question if we were right but eventually small groups of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse could be heard overhead, and then seen as they arrived for their daily ritual.



Steppes at La Cumbre

Whilst waiting, we kept an eye on raptors for that other speciality. After close encounters with Booted Eagle and multiple Black Kites, a much larger bird appeared and delighted the group with our first Spanish Imperial Eagle, the largest Eagle on the plains and a local endemic. That left one big target and after walking we finally spotted a

single Great Bustard that appeared to be on its own. Walking to the top of the rise only confirmed that it was on its own and we then headed to the picnic site at Santa Marta itself. Our lunch was enlivened by a close pass by a couple of Cinereous Vulture, although if they were interested in us or our food we will never know.

After lunch we headed further west onto Llanos de Cácares. Here nest boxes have been built to help the local population of European Roller. They also provide a home for Kestrels and Jackdaws, but with the help of other birders we tracked down the first returnee that we had heard of. Close by we found another two Great Bustards before heading back to the gorge just outside of Santa Marta where a few more species were soon added, including our only Kingfisher of the trip.

The steppes back to Las Canteras held most of the same species, but stopping for a Ladder Snake resulted in finding another two Great Bustards, both of these being young males. It was likely that these were wandering alone as they were not yet of an age to join in with the breeding season.

Day 5 Monday 11th April

Meseta de Deleitosa & Arrocampo

After our normal morning routine, we left at 9am for a short trip to the north and the garrigue and Cork Oak woodland at Meseta de Deleitosa. The day was warm and with rain forecasted for later, we tried to keep ahead of the rain clouds. We walked down into the wooded valley, a habit unlike any we had visited to date, and the bird species reinforced this. Singing Woodlarks were everywhere and the trees were full of tits, including Crested & Long tailed. Short-toed Treecreepers were plentiful and we could hear Wryneck, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Iberian Green Woodpecker, but sightings eluded us. On returning to the buses, we stopped at a patch of cistus garrigue and a showy singing Dartford Warbler was some reward.



Cork woodland at Meseta de Deleitosa

We headed a bit further and stopped at a small reserve just outside Arrocampo. Famous for the spring flush of orchids, our timing was good and in no-time we had found Naked Man, Mirror of Venus, Yellow Bee, Woodcock (of two local forms), Common Tongue and *conica* form of Tooth Orchid.

It was then on to Arrocampo proper, a reserve that is based around the cooling reservoirs for the nearby nuclear power facility. The resulting reed beds and water channels attract a number of waterbirds and we were soon delighted by both male and female Little Bitterns scooting by. The reedbeds were full of herons, including Purple and the first of the season's warblers with the other worldly reeling of Savi's Warblers grabbing our attention.

The water channels attracted a few terns and we were soon watching both Gull-billed and Whiskered Terns as they patrolled back and forth. More attention was given to the Glossy Ibises and a feeding party close to the path gave everyone good views.

However, Arrocampo isn't only about waterbirds and the surrounding farmland is good for raptors. Our first Red Kite of the trip was well overdue, but it was Black-winged Kite that was our primary focus. Trying the back-roads we finally found a pair, nicely perched up on a dead tree for all to admire. With that we called it a day as the rain started and we were subjected to a full deluge for the trip back to Las Canteras, remarking how lucky we all were that it had waited until we had finished before the heavens opening.

Day 6

Tuesday 12th April

Trujillo, Madroñera & Llanos de Belen

Another cloudy and cool start and we headed into Trujillo itself to experience the 16th century splendour brought by Franciso Pizarro's capture of Peru in 1532 and subsequent enrichment of the town. We walked the narrow streets up to Plaza Mayor, where the town was preparing for the celebration of Easter on the weekend ahead, and then up to the Alcazar that looks over the steppes and the town itself. Looking up we could see a dozen or so of the local population of Lesser Kestrels and swifts that make the old town their home.



Plaza Mayor, Trujillo

After leaving Trujillo we headed the short distance to the village of Madroñera and a couple of stops in an attempt to find some of our missing species. Our first place was some Almond orchards which had the Hawfinches we were looking for, but they were skittish and wouldn't sit in the open. Along the tracks here were plentiful *champagne* form of Green-winged Orchid that provided some compensation, and in the cool & blustery conditions it was perhaps not surprising that it seemed that the local Golden Orioles had not yet arrived back. The next stop was the town park itself and this time we had success as one of the resident Scops Owls gave wonderful views at its chosen roost site.

We then headed onto Llanos de Belén, the steppes towards Trujillo, keeping a wary eye on the rain clouds that appeared to be building. We stopped for a picnic and although the rain held off, it was disrupted by a Great Spotted Cuckoo making a fleeting appearance. We then slowly drove back towards Trujillo surprised by the sunshine and the constant flocks of Bee-eaters around us. As before, we were serenaded by larks and Corn Buntings throughout, but it was the chats that grabbed our attention with Stonechat, Whinchat and especially Northern Wheatears being plentiful. A final surprise was a dispute between a Booted Eagle and a young Spanish Imperial Eagle, the gingery plumage of the latter being an age type seldom seen. Soon enough it was time to

return to Las Canteras. Our final stop being for Black and Griffon Vultures by the side of the road fighting over the lambing after-birth – a timely reminder of their role as the area's natural clean-up squads

We returned just before the showers returned and time for everyone to prepare for the journey home the following day.

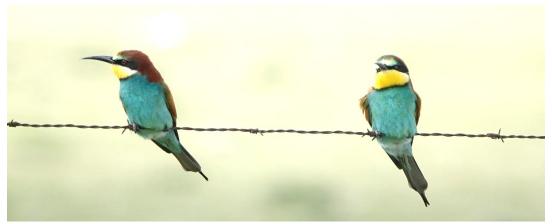
Day 7

Wednesday 13th April

Return to Madrid

We were all packed and ready to leave by 9am and a thick layer of fog awaited our send off. The journey back to Madrid was uneventful and included a brief stop at a service station for a leg stretch. Closer to Madrid, the weather cleared and the normal species were always with us on the journey, White Storks and Black Kites being the most notable amongst them.

The Iberia flight back to the UK went without a hitch and we cleared the formalities with no sign of the reported delays and confusion and headed home with plenty of memories of this wonderful part of Spain.



European Bee-eaters

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced April 2022									
Con	nmon name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Mute Swan	Cygnus olor			1				
2	Egyptian Goose - I	Alopochen aegyptiaca			2				
3	Garganey	Spatula querquedula			2	1			
4	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			2	1			
5	Gadwall	Mareca strepera			20	2			
6	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope			24				
7	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	2		10	1	3	✓	
8	Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus					Н		
9	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix			Н	Н			
10	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		1	✓	2	2		
11	Common Swift	Apus apus			✓			✓	
12	Great Bustard	Otis tarda				5			
13	Little Bustard	Tetrax tetrax				2			
14	Great Spotted Cuckoo	Clamator glandarius						1	
15	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		1	2	Н	1		
16	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Pterocles alchata				9			
17	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Pterocles orientalis				3			
18	Rock Dove	Columba livia		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
19	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓		✓	✓	2	✓
20	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus					Н		
22	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus			3		✓		
23	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra			√		✓	3	
24	Western Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio					1		
25	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis			2	2	1	2	
26	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus			✓				
27	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus	Н	Н				Н	
28	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus			5	2	4	4	
29	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago			1			4	
30	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos			1				
31	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus			1				
32	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus			✓		1		
33	Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica					3		
34	Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida					1		
35	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra		1					
36	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			✓	1	✓		
38	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus					12		
39	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia			12				
40	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus			1		6		
41	Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	Н						
42	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓		3	6	✓		✓
43	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	1	1	2	1	2	1	
44	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		1	2		✓		

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced			April 2022							
	nmon name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
45	Great Egret	Ardea alba			1		4			
46	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta			6		6			
47	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus			1					
48	Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus		1			2			
49	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		6						
50	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		✓	6	6	4	6		
51	Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus		3		3	4	2		
52	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus	1	4				3		
53	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	2	4	1	3	2	4		
54	Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	Aquila adalberti				1		1		
55	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus			4	1	6			
56	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	2	2		8				
57	Red Kite	Milvus milvus					2	4		
58	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	✓	6	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	1	1	2			1		
60	Little Owl	Athene noctua	1					3		
61	Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops	Н					1		
62	Eurasian Eagle-Owl	Bubo bubo		1						
63	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	✓	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	•	
64	European Roller	Coracias garrulus				2				
65	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis				1				
66	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
67	Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla					Н			
68	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor					Н			
69	Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei					Н			
70	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	1		2			20		
71	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	6	6	3	✓	√	√		
72	Merlin	Falco columbarius					1			
73	Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis		1	6	6	4	9		
74	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator		3	12	12	4	2		
75	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius					2			
76	Iberian Magpie - N	Cyanopica cooki			6	2	4	8		
77	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	
78	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		✓	6	✓	4	4		
79	Northern Raven	Corvus corax		2		4		6		
80	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus					2	_		
81	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓	✓	6	2		
82	Great Tit	Parus major		√	✓	✓	6	3		
83	Woodlark	Lullula arborea		1			✓			
84	Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae		√	✓	✓	✓	✓		
85	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
86	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		✓		✓		4		
87	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia					4	· ·		
88	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		✓		20	T	4		
89	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		✓	✓	✓	✓	→	√	
90	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		· ·	· ·	→	→	,	→	
91	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		6	12	2	2			
92	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		1	H	H	2	Н		

N=N	N=Near-endemic I=Introduced April 2022								
Com	mon name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
93	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus					2		
94	Iberian Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus ibericus					1		
95	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus			Н		Н		
96	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides					1		
97	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		Н	12	✓	✓		
98	Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala		Н	10		✓	✓	
99	Western Subalpine Warbler	Curruca iberiae		Н					
100	Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata					1		
101	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		Н			2		
102	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea					2		
103	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla		Н			4		
104	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus				1			
106	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
107	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos		Н	Н	Н	1	Н	Н
108	European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca				1		1	
109	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		1					
110	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		3					
111	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra				2		1	
112	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
113	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe				6		10	
114	Western Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica		1					
115	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√
116	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
117	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava				4			
118	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea				1			
119	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		6	✓				
120	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis			2	2			
121	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	
122	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes						4	
123	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		2	✓	✓	✓	2	
124	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		4					
125	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		12	✓	✓	✓	✓	
126	European Serin	Serinus serinus		✓	✓	✓	√	✓	√
127	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus		3	4				
128	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		✓	✓	✓	√	✓	✓
129	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia		1					
130	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus				1			

Others

			April 22							
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	9 10	11	12	13	
	Mammals									
1	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa		12						
2	European Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	1			1				
3	Granada Hare - N	Lepus granatensis				1		2		
4	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		1						

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