

Extremadura in Spring – A Beginner Birdwatching Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 10th April 2023



Griffon Vultures by Marcus Kohler



White Stork by Doug Yelland



Short-toed Eagle by Doug Yelland



Tawny Owl by Doug Yelland

Tour report by Marcus Kohler



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Tour participants: Pete Stephens and Marcus Kohler (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Tuesday 4th April

Madrid and drive to Extremadura

Our group convened at Madrid airport. With a convergence of four different flights, it was perhaps no surprise that we didn't quite leave on time. However, minibuses collected, we set off on a lovely clear Spanish evening to Trujillo, our base for this short break. Our focus was on journey but the occasional Black and Red Kites, and Booted Eagles kept our spirits up before the arrival in the extraordinary Palacio De Santa Marta Hotel, where we had to breathe in a bit to get the minibus there, but which afforded stunning views of a beautiful town with great views of Extremadura.

Day 2

Wednesday 5th April

Estanque de San Lazaro, Santa Marta de Magasca, Rio Almonte Puentes de don Francisco, Plains of Monroy, Casares old road to b521 to Trujillo

A relaxing start to the morning, with a short walk around the Estanque de San Lazaro park, whilst Pete sought provisions. Serin sang above us, Lesser Kestrels were breeding on a building within the town where bespoke nest boxes have been provided. A couple of Hoopoes flew past and sang distantly, on the pond coots had young, we identified the three species of hirundine and discussed identification. A pair of Black-winged Stilt gave a stunning view within the flowering water crowfoot and a Little Ringed Plover flew around us.

We were soon off to our first experience of the steppes, as we stopped just outside the village of Santa Marta. It was a moment of "where to look?" on one side, Cinereous and Griffon Vultures approached, on the other a Woodchat Shrike showed its stunning plumage. Corn Buntings sang boldly from the olive trees, Iberian Shrike sat up, a group of Bee-eaters called and showed well, against a backdrop of several Black and Red Kites and even a male Marsh Harrier.

A short stop further on and the Calandra Larks dominated the bird song and the display flights, a stunning Whinchat, our first of six Montague's Harriers (all female type "ringtails") that we would see today quartered the field several times, and our first Wheatear was sighted. Coffee in Santa Marta with the House Martins nest building and then lunch on the outskirts of the village where a good picnic was enjoyed and a Bonelli's Eagle flew over, and Stonechats and Zitting Cisticolas were on territory.

In the afternoon we searched the immediate area for Roller and although Bee-eaters called and we had several encounters with a range of raptors, it was apparent the Rollers has yet to arrive back. In the evening after dinner, the Semana Santa celebrations were spectacular in the Plaza Major in Trujillo with a dramatic and gothic procession into the church next to our hotel.

Day 3

Thursday 6th April

Las Canteras & Parque Nacional de Monfragüe

This morning we journeyed to Monfragüe, making several stops en route. The first, at Rio Almonte, gave a real feel for Spanish countryside. Cuckoo and Hoopoe were singing together with the now ubiquitous Corn Bunting

and by the river we heard our first Nightingale of four we would hear this day and a Blackcap showed briefly. At the river bridge, House Martins were nest building and White Wagtails skirted the shingle and river stones. A Little Ringed Plover was on territory showing well before a brief display flight, whilst all above us the vultures were kettling, dominated by at least 30 Griffon, but with other species appearing, a light phase Booted Eagle looked so small but its presence next to a significantly larger Bonelli's Eagle gave a brief opportunity to compare size range of Spanish birds of prey. Both Whinchat and Stonechat flitted around the drystone wall and a group of Spanish Sparrows flew down with an impressive male present. Cetti's Warblers sang distantly, and Bee-eaters circled the bridge, albeit a little high to fully appreciate this fine species. A Zitting Cisticola completed its song flight, and we were able to watch it collect moss within the Broom scrub for its nest.

As we journeyed a short distance further, our first view of Short-toed Eagle was quickly followed by a second bird that enabled both buses to get good views of this attractive medium sized raptor. As the first bird flew over, we could see its pale underparts and distinct flecking and dark throat. On the edge of Monfragüe, a third bird was watched within another kettle of vultures and was seen diving down from a considerable height presumably on some unsuspecting reptile.

We were not the first at the magnificent viewpoint of Salto Del Giltano, Here Griffon Vultures in squadron formations dominated the sky and their nests could be clearly seen amid the dramatic cliff face on the edge of the river. Two Black Storks flew around us and we located a first and second nest of this uncommon species. Telescope views showed the colourful iridescence on the neck that they show in breeding plumage, rarely seen in the field. Behind us a spectacular adult Egyptian Vulture was a lucky reveal as they are uncommon in Monfragüe, showing its beige plumage and wedge-shaped tail. Black Redstarts showed occasionally beneath us as did Blue Rock Thrush and Sardinian Warbler.

We had a late picnic lunch within the park and then returned to Salto del Giltano, enabling everyone to catch up with the stunning male Blue Rock Thrush, and further views of Cirl Bunting and of course, the spectacle of Griffon Vultures overhead and at the nest, whilst a third nest of Black Stork being found was a real positive end to our exciting day.

Day 4

Friday 7th April

Santa Marta de Magasca plains, free time, Meseta de Deliciosa

It was an early start to get on the plain before first light. Black Redstart was singing pre-dawn from the church, as this species tends to do. We were on the plain for first light and it didn't take long for Doug to locate a displaying male Great Bustard. A pair of Little Bustards flew across and out of site, but the male was in full cotton dance. Six females looked on, with one showing more than a passing interest, but in spite of the male displaying itself into what looked like a huge bundle of cotton wool, he didn't seem to succeed in his aims, although a hareem of such a size, meant that time was on his side. The plain was cool at this time but as the sun began to rise, raptors began to show, and the larks were singing. Cuckoos were sitting up on the fence and Doug was having a top morning and found our first Great-spotted Cuckoo within the grassland, a short walk further on and a party of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew by, low followed by several other groups, although it was frustrating that one bus couldn't get on them. We returned to our hotel for a late breakfast and an early siesta.

In the afternoon, we travelled to a cork woodland area and took a short walk. Nuthatches were singing and showed briefly and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker came in to view allowing for some excellent photographs. Jane and Ric found an Oil Striped Beetle and a Dartford Warbler, whilst a scolding Blackbird and agitated Chaffinches led us to a disturbed Tawny Owl, which was sitting on a bush near the ground, having had its roost disturbed by the mobsters. Our late picnic was shared with a Woodchat Shrike before heading back to our hotel.

Day 5

Saturday 8th April

Embalse de Alcollarin

Our main destination was this huge reservoir and its surrounding oak woodland buffer. However en route we stopped at Villa de Torres for a short farmland walk. Several Hoopoes showed extremely well, whilst Stonechat sang along the path. Sardinian Warbler was singing and showing itself briefly and we stopped by the Granha, to watch a pair of Iberian Magpies nest building in the olive grove. Our return to the vehicles was spectacularly interrupted by a Great-spotted Cuckoo flying over us, being chased by its host species, a pair of Magpies. Soon we could see three of these large spectacular cuckoos, an iconic species of the Spanish interior, hearing their raucous call, and we could study the plumage of this bizarre bird with its rich cream underparts and blue grey back, its pirate like mask showing that the most obvious bird was a first summer individual.

A quick coffee in Zorita and then on to a different area of this large reservoir. A Booted Eagle was there as we arrived and huge carp were patrolling the water from the damn wall, with European Pond Turtles on the rocks. Gadwall and Shoveler were present but the displaying Great Crested Grebes made a valiant effort at stealing the show. Bee-eaters were vocal and we could watch two pairs nest building in a bank beneath the damn. Our picnic lunch was a little further along the edge of the reservoir amid an area of cork oak. Here a smaller pool was full of life. Spoonbills were now close by and in full breeding plumage as they spooned the shallows, several Purple Herons were observed but the Glossy Ibis and Green Sandpiper were only very briefly evident. Sedge Warbler and Nightingale sang and we heard our first Lesser Whitethroat. The smaller pool allowed several opportunities to observe and compare Little and Great Egret, and Cormorants, Iberian Yellow Wagtails, Black-winged Stilts, Kingfisher and Little Ringed Plovers all made cameo appearances. A Short-toed Eagle was briefly present but Marsh Harrier and Black Kite far more frequent. In the shallows a small beautifully marked Viperine Snake swam across - a very boldly marked water snake of the Med.

It was very hot and though we knew the area held more birds, we needed to move on to another and cooler area of the reservoir, here a pair of Black-necked Grebes in spectacular breeding plumage were close to the edge, with their gold flecking on the sides of the black head. We had several stops for Iberian Magpies, harriers, Whinchat and Wheatear. Our final moments at the reservoir were shared with a group of Bee-eaters in perfect light, close to the buses enabling spectacular opportunities to capture this most photogenic species.

Day 6

Sunday 9th April

Arrocampo nature reserve

Our day today focused on Arrocampo, an impressive wetland reserve, that owes much of its existence as mitigation for the dam and nuclear power station located in the neighbouring village of Almaraz. On the approach to Saucedilla, our first wetland of the complex was either side of the road. Savi's Warblers buzzed and Gull-billed Terns patrolled, a bird that was to be a companion for much of the morning hunting the fields in distinct groups, the white underwings, contrasting with the glossy black crown and distinct thick set black bill. A Purple Swamphen was annoyingly brief, but Purple Herons bolder, Kingfisher crossed the lake and our first Night Herons flew across. Raptors were led by Marsh Harriers, but yet another ringtail Montagu's Harrier showed itself, adding further fire to the mystery of missing male birds. Had they not arrived yet and the females migrated earlier? This didn't seem logical, but the absence of a male bird was both frustrating and bizarre.

A nice coffee in Saucedilla enabled us to watch Spanish Sparrows nest building in a storks next and then onto the reserve. Reed Warblers sang and Purple were the most common heron. Night Herons sat prominently in the tree revealing their stunning plumage. Unexpectedly, four Ferruginous Duck flew close to us revealing their prominent wing bars. This was a real bonus, largely a winter visitor and uncommon species. A short distance on, and a raised elevation enabled all to finally get good views of Purple Swamphen. Savi's Warbler also sang from a reed fronds. A Penduline Tit called as it flew over and a group of Common Waxbills were equally brief. Whiskered Tern, our first marsh tern; gave a fly-by, revealing its white cheek and sooty plumage. Picnic lunch today was to the song of a Nightingale and Marsh Harriers quartering the reeds. In the afternoon, another wetland area, enabled further views of swamphen and comparisons of three species of egret and Greater Kestrel differences from Lesser Kestrel.

Our return to Trujillo was to pass through Monfragüe National Park. We drove through beautiful groves of cork oak and riverine woodland with the early warbler song dominated by Nightingale but accompanied by Cetti's and Blackcaps. We stopped at a crag by the River and an Eagle Owl was roosting, tucked in tight against the rocks. It was so hot, so we headed back slowly to Trujillo, for our last evening. Our route blocked by the exuberant youth of Extremadura celebrating Semana Santa en masse in the plaza of the lively and friendly town.

Day 7

Monday 10th April

Trujillo to Madrid and home

With warnings of traffic jams at the bank holiday, we set off with plenty of time on our journey back to Madrid, which was largely uneventful. Red and Black Kites, Gull-billed Terns and some unfortunate road kill (Polecat, Little Owl and a snake sp, possibly a Ladder ?). We said our goodbyes at the Salidas and spilt back into our varied routes home and to Madrid. We had a week of outstanding weather and talismanic wildlife of this special area of Spain, recording 128 species between us and studying how to identify the remarkable avian diversity of hidden Spain, based in a beautiful walled city that was the focal point of the dramatic Easter celebrations.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		April 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Egyptian Goose - I	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>					1			
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					10			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		2			20			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	4	10	1		✓	4		
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>								
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>					1			
Ferruginous Duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>						4		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2		1		H		
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		5	2					
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		100		2	✓	✓		
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		2						
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				12				
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				2				
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>				1	3			
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		2	1	2	2	1		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				20				
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	20	20	✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>						H		
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					2	4		
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		8			✓	3		
Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>						6		
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4				LO		
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					30+			
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					2			
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		2			2			

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		April 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		1	1		1		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					1	1	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					1		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						H	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						H	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					20		
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>					3	20	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>						2	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			6				
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		20	30	20	✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1		10	10	
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					10		
Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>						H	
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>						6	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				40		✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				3	3	✓	
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					4	20	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					6	20	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					1	2	
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			1			1	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		30	100	40	10	20	2
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		5	5	3		5	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1	3		1		
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	4	4	4		1		
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		1	1				
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		3	2	1	4	10	3
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		4	3	2		1	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	5	10	5	1	1		2
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2	5	10	10	5	20	5
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	2	2		2	
Eurasian Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>					H		
Tawny owl	<i>Strix Aluco</i>				1			
Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>						1	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3		1	5	2	
European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>							
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						2	
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>			30	20	20		
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>				1		H	
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		20	10	2	1	1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	5		2		3	
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		3	1		1		
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		2	2	2	4	1	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1	1		6		
Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>			1	2	20	✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	6	6	✓	✓	5	✓	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		2	2	2	2		

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		April 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			2	1	2		
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			1				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			2	2	2	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	2	2	2	✓	
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>					2	1	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				1			
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		20	10	10	✓		
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		10	30	40			
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			10			20	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	6	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H		H	4	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			4				
Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>							
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					H		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1				
Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>						LO	
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>						5	
Sedge warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		H			H		
Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>						3	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2	3	1	2	4	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			1			H	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>			1		4	2	
Western Subalpine Warbler	<i>Curruca iberiae</i>				LO			
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>							
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>				1			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			2	1			
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				1			
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	100	40	10	10	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>					1		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2		2	✓		
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>			H	H	h	h	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>			4	1	1	2	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			2				
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1	1		1		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		4	4	2		6	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3	2		1		
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			6			10	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>						LO	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>					1		
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	1				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	4		2	1	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			1				
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		H	2	4	2	3	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		H	2	1	2	h	

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		April 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		H	2				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		5	4	2	2	2	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		8	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		30	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1				
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			2				

Others

		April 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mammals								
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elephus</i>			1		1		
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>						1	
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	2						
Reptiles and amphibians								
Spanish pond turtle	<i>Muuremys leprosa</i>		4			4		
Viperine Snake	<i>Natrix maura</i>						1	
Ocellated Lizard	<i>Lacerta lepida</i>				1			
Slow Worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>					1		
Insects								
Odonata - Dragonflies								
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax Parthenope</i>					✓		
Black Tailed skimmer	<i>Libulla depressa</i>					✓		
Lepidoptera:- Butterflies								
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		4					
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		2					
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		2			2		
Small Heath	<i>Coenympha pamphilus</i>					2		
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>		2	1				
Other Insects								
Red Striped Oil Beetle	<i>Berberomeeloe majalis</i>							
Fish								
Carp	<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>							