Go Slow in Extremadura

Naturetrek Tour Report

16th - 23rd May 2023





Black Redstart



European Serin



Great Bustard

Tour report and images by Pete Stevens



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Tour participants: Pete Stevens and Simon Woolley (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

A sunny week but with a cool breeze most days and warmer in the afternoons. Though late in the season, we saw a very good variety and nearly all of the best of Extremadura's birds. Our hotel exuded character and its location in the centre of the old town steps away from the Plaza Mayor, or main square. Highlights were undoubtedly: Little Bittern hunting close to the group at the edge of a water channel, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the early morning light over the plains, waking to the sound of Spotless Starling in song and the clatter of White Stork bills, Black Storks on the nest, colourful Bee-eaters and Rollers and a very impressive array of birds of prey. Worthy of mention also is the lovely views that we gained of some of the typical but more common birds such as Hoopoe and Iberian Magpie.

Day 1

Tuesday 16th May

After gathering the group together at Madrid airport, we soon got underway and off towards our stay in the heart of the ancient town of Trujillo. On the way we stopped to stretch our legs and get a coffee near Oropesa.

As soon as we exited the vehicles, Pete spotted raptors overhead. Those with their binoculars to hand, soon picked out four Booted Eagles. After coffee, we examined the bird life around a small pond adjacent. Around 40 Cattle Egrets were in a flock there plus, three Spoonbills and a Great Egret, also Mallard, Gadwall, Little Grebe and a Black-winged Stilt. While hawking over the pond was a pair of Red-rumped Swallows. A fine start to our birding trip. On then for the final leg to our hotel.

Day 2

Wednesday 17th May

A gentle start today as Simon took the group around the park encompassing the Etanque de San Lazaro, While Pete got the provisions for the day at a nearby supermarket. When Pete returned the group had already seen or heard Moorhen and Coot, Mallard with young, Little Grebe and Spanish Sparrow and were then admiring the nesting Lesser Kestrels on a nearby grain silo.

We set off then to the Plains of Santa Marta, stopping first at a viewpoint with virtually 360-degree panorama. Here we soon found Iberian Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow, Black Kite and Griffon Vultures. Simon picked out a Thekla's Lark just on the other side of the road and the group were close enough to be able to see the relevant features of this difficult bird to identify and to compare it to nearby Crested Larks. Before we moved on a Short-toed Snake-eagle drifted over us providing great views in the morning light.

We then moved up the road a short distance to a rough track across the rolling plains. Calandra Larks were in song and seen in 'courtship chase'. Then a pale raptor over the ridge proved to be a sub-adult male Montagu's Harrier. White Storks stalked the damp grassland and a Common Buzzard flew by before we headed on for coffee and a lunch break.

On the way to the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, a Red-legged Partridge was reluctant to give up the road! After a coffee we set up lunch at the town picnic site. After this we travelled the short distance down to the bridge

over the Rio Magasca. Here we stopped to enjoy the quiet and saw Bee-eaters, House Martins and Crag Martins nesting under the bridge, White Wagtail on rocks in the river and a Spanish Pond Turtle in the water. A lovely Cleopatra butterfly flew past before we moved on to the "Roller Road".

The road across the Caceres Plains is known for its population of Eurasian Rollers, encouraged by the nest boxes erected on telegraph poles. We picked up three Rollers this trip, but plus Lesser Kestrel and a Little Owl also using the boxes. At a stop to scan the plains we picked out a distant Cinereous Vulture on the ground then, taking the group by surprise a flock of six Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew quickly past. We continued on, searching the fields when on the side of the road a Short-toed Lark could be seen picking at seeds. A good end to the day before our drive back to Trujillo.

Day 3

Thursday 18th May

After a good breakfast, we got the vehicles and set of north from Trujillo and made our first stop at a bridge over the Rio Almonte. On leaving the vehicles a distant Cuckoo could be heard and a Woodchat Shrike stood up in full view on a post.

Down by the river House Martins and a pair of Red-rumped Swallows were hawking around and we could hear two Nightingales and a Cetti's Warbler in song. A Bee-eater alighted in a tree enabling us to get telescopes upon it. We then moved on to our destination for the day Monfragüe National Park.

After a short stop to buy fresh bread for our picnic we arrived at Salto de Gitano the "Gypsy's Leap" a huge cliff with numerous Griffon Vulture nests. We immediately saw a Black Stork in flight over the reservoir. A short walk and Pete got a telescope on one of the two the Black Stork nests. Simon followed up quickly with his telescope on the second nest. Crag Martins were flying around our heads and it was not long before a Blue Rock Thrush popped up onto a nearby crag and started to sing in full view of the group, only to be joined by a Rock Bunting also breaking into song! Our stay continued with occasional Cinereous Vulture among Griffons overflying and then an Egyptian Vulture follow shortly by a Peregrine.

Our last stop before lunch was at the Tietar Bridge where we got a frustratingly short view of Hawfinch before watching the hundreds of nesting House Martins on the bridge and a single Alpine Swift. We stopped at the tiny settlement of Villa Real de San Carlos. Here while Pete set up lunch Simon took the group off to some Mulberry trees where he found feeding Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Golden Oriole and Hawfinch! Back at the picnic Golden Oriole was calling as we ate in the shade of some well-placed trees.

On next to the Tietar dam where we got telescope views of some Griffon Vultures with well grown young. Further on at another cliff colony we saw Blue Rock Thrush Rock Bunting and Black Redstart plus a fly over Western Imperial Eagle. A good time then to leave for our drive back to Trujillo.

Day 4 Friday 19th May

An early start today so that we could be on Monroy Road crossing the plains for first light. The first bird to arrive was a White Stork at the edge of a small pond. Soon after a Stone Curlew arrived, then a second providing good views as the sun rose.

We could hear Pin-tailed Sandgrouse calling as they flew around, then four landed a few hundred metres away. They were just close enough to get fine views of these beautiful birds through our telescopes. The morning light was coming from the right direction for their plumage to shine out – a real treat for the group.

After a while we gradually made our way back towards Trujillo stopping to scan the plains on the way. Pete spotted a single Great Bustard as we drove and on, we got good views of not one but three females. A little further on an immature male was showing. We stopped the vehicles only to be side-tracked by a Great Spotted Cuckoo in long grass next to our vans.

Other stops provided a Common Cuckoo at close quarters and excellent views of Cinereous and Griffon Vultures plus two very pale Short-toed Snake-eagles and an immature dark phase Booted Eagle that had us wondering over identification for a while.

After a late breakfast/brunch the group had time to explore the old town before we gathered again at just before three o'clock for a short drive to a partly shaded track just south-east of the town. As soon as we entered the narrow lane leading to our track a Hoopoe was spotted that then perched on the ground and appeared to be sunning itself or quite probably 'anting', a practice that aids control of feather pests. Only a little further along the lane an Iberian Grey Shrike was stood up providing good views,

After parking we took a stroll along the track soon setting up the telescope on a Corn Bunting so that the group could get some close-ups. Iberian Magpies were hunting around trees and shrubs close enough for some members to get photographs.

Despite the dry Spring there were still some interesting plants along the trackside including: Giant Fennel, Spiny and Common Asparagus, Pale Flax and both Greater and Lesser Milk Thistle. These along with a Knapweed species were attended by several butterfly species including Iberian Gatekeeper, Iberian Marbled White and numerous Meadow Brown butterflies.

Further along the track we spotted a family of Black Redstarts and soaring in the clear sky we had Cinereous and Griffon Vultures, Short-toed Snake-eagle and a light phase Booted Eagle. Over a distant ridge Pete spotted two Black Storks in flight. Then at the end of the lane Simon picked up a high-pitched call and discovered 'a family' of Short-toed Treecreepers. Leaving the group to slowly stroll back Pete and Simon made their way back to the vehicles to prepare light refreshment to keep the group going until dinner.

Day 5

Saturday 20th May

Today we drove back about half an hour towards Madrid where we pulled off the motorway through Almaraz towards the small town of Suacedilla and the wetland reserve of Arrocampo.

We stopped on the road to Saucedilla beside a body of open water fringed with reeds and sedges. The low trill of Savi's Warbler could be heard not far away but no sightings. There was a brief view of Western Marsh Harrier. A Black-crowned Night Heron flew over followed by a flock of Glossy Ibis. In the distance we could see Cattle, Little and Great Egret, plus Purple Heron and over the water a Gull-billed Tern was hawking back and forth.

We drove the short distance on to Saucedilla where we took coffee before entering the Arrocampo Reserve opposite. In the reserve it was not long before we saw our first Little Bittern and then a Western Swamphen at close quarters. After a few flight views of Little Bittern, a male started fishing at the edge of the swamp with a few metres of the group. Soon the group did not know which way to look when a female Swamphen came to the edge with a well grown chick that she was still feeding.

Before we dragged ourselves away from this first site, we walked a few yards further to where we could see Purple Herons going back and forth into the swamp where it was suspected that they had nests.. A shout went up, and there in the distance was an Osprey. Unfortunately, it stayed in the distance, so we moved on to the second Arrocampo stop.

At the second site we heard and eventually got views of Savi's Warbler and Great Reed Warbler. In a nearby pool Coot, Moorhen and Little Grebe could be seen and a Spoonbill in breeding plumage dropped into feed. Then briefly a Ferruginous Duck and chicks showed themselves before moving back into the dense swamp vegetation. At the last stop, we had fine views of Gull-billed Tern and Great Cormorant on a low concrete dam wall. Back to the beginning of the reserve then for a picnic lunch before we set off to a north entrance to Monfragüe National Park.

We drove into the reserve stopping occasionally when an interesting bird was seen or heard. At Tietar Cliffs we stopped and scanned. A Booted Eagle was soaring over. Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting were both present. Meanwhile Simon had got onto a Subalpine Warbler and a Turtle Dove just a little up the road. Then Jean pointed out some Wild Boar on the other side of the river along with several 'Humbugs' as boar young are known.

Back then to a nearby casa rural for an ice-cream before our drive back.

Day 6 Sunday 21st May

Just a short drive to start today off. Through the village of Belen to the plains beyond. After leaving the village we stopped at the first vantage point to scan the plains. In the distance Black Kites could be seen perched. A Hoopoe flew past and then a large raptor caused a little confusion. It was a second summer Short-toed Snake Eagle in very worn plumage.

On then to the next high spot and Brian spotted large brown birds less than three hundred metres away. Eight immature male Great bustards. They treated us to fine views as they plodded about feeding in the long grass before taking flight with a couple flying over us.

Approaching the next high spot there were three birds on the wire fence next to the road – Great Spotted Cuckoos – and great views. We then stopped by a farm where Hoopoe was flying around in display. From here on a rockpile we could see a Little Owl.

On the way to our next stop the front vehicle had a Hobby fly across in front. Next was a rather distant male Great Bustard. We searched in vain for any Little Bustards as a group of Red-striped Oil Beetles kept the group interested. Time then to head on to Torrecillas for coffee. On the way a Short-toed Snake Eagle was perched on a roadside Pilon and at a small pool; Mallard, Gadwall, Black-winged Stilt and a Grey Heron.

After coffee we drove on to the Meseta Delietosa and down into the valley where we stopped in the shade of oaks beside the Rio Almonte for our picnic lunch. Nightingales, Cetti's Warbler and, unusually for the habitat here, Great Reed Warbler were all in song.

After lunch and a stroll around the site getting views of both Nightingale and Great Reed Warbler plus finding Small Pincertail dragonfly (*Onychogomphus forcipatus*), we made for our final stop near Jaraicejo.

As soon as we pulled off the road we saw a Thekla's Lark. Then we did not go far for several minutes as from the parking areas we saw about a dozen Hawfinches, a Western Orphean Warbler and a Dartford Warbler. The Orphean Warbler eventually flew down to a Spanish Broom very close to the group and we could all identify the bird. We then took a stroll along the track to the edge of some woodland. On the way we picked up a low call and song and got to see Subalpine Warbler. When we got to the woodland edge two Southern White Admiral butterflies landed on the track in front of us. By now the skies were darkening and a few drops of rain could be felt so we strode back to the vehicles just in time. It was a down-poor for the drive back.

Day 7 Monday 22nd May

On our last full day we set off South-east from Trujillo. Our first objective was Black-shouldered Kite at a site south of Alcollarin. As we arrived one flew over the rear vehicle and alongside so that moist of the group got a good view.

We parked up and got out, setting up telescopes in readiness. First, we could see two distant birds in typical hovering hunting technique for Black-shouldered Kite. Hoopoes were here and there around us and a Little Owl stood on a dead stump. Then on the other side from them a Black –shoudered Kite flew up to perch on a tree a couple of hundred metres away. Telescopes were trained on the bird as it sat for some time. When it flew away – so did we. We drove back stopping briefly at a small wetland site where we saw Mallard and Zitting Cisticola. Here we heard Common Reed Warbler and the squeal of a Water Rail.

We spent some time scanning the plains of the Campo Lugar road and got views of Eurasian Roller and Lesser Kestrel before turning off along a rough track to a small pond. There was a great variety of birds here for a small area of fresh water: Black-winged Stilt, Coot, Gadwall, Grey Heron and Purple Heron, Spoonbill and Little Egrets. Also both male and female Western Marsh Harrier

Coffee time loomed so we made for a road house the other side of Campoi Lugar. After this we took a rough road to Alcollarin. A pair of Collared Pratincoles flew between the vans and we both pulled to a halt. Getting out we realised that at least three pairs were on the fields next to us. We got some good views on the ground and in flight and discovered breeding Greater Short-toed Lark too.

Time then for lunch. Only stopping to allow the group a look at, the now abandoned, Spanish Sparrow colony hanging nests in a small Eucalyptus grove. We drove on to the end of the Reservoir; Embalse Alcollarin, where there is a shady picnic area beside a small extension of the reservoir.

While Pete and Simon got on with the usual job of preparing picnic lunch, the group scanned the small reservoir picking up Little Grebes, a family of Western Marsh Harriers, a Gull-billed Tern at close quarters and the song of Great Reed Warbler from a sedge bed. As they did, a group of Spoonbills flew over just above us.

Just as lunch was being finished, Pete took the telescope to scan the near edge of the larger reservoir. Along with Steve they picked out Green Sandpiper, Redshank and Greenshank and a Glossy Ibis, meanwhile a Quail was calling nearby.

After lunch the rest of the group joined them, and Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper were added to the list. The group then walked down to a band of scrub where Melodious Warbler had been found a few weeks earlier. Sardinian Warbler was first seen then after a while everyone managed to see the Melodious, even hearing a short snatch of its distinctly un-melodious song. As we prepared to leave, Simon picked up a very distant pair of Bonelli's Eagles and then the Quail called once more allowing the rest of the group to hear its distinctive "wet-my-lips" call.

We drove then back down the Embalse, stopping a couple of times for good views of Bee-eaters before the journey back to Trujillo for our last night. At the bird listing after dinner Geoff and Sue updated us on their bat recording. They had used a bat detector at the castle above our hotel and discovered ten different species over the week, a great addition to our trip.

Day 8

Tuesday 23rd May

After an early breakfast, we loaded up the vans and got the group seated for our journey to Madrid and our flights home. After only half an hour we stopped to get a short look at Arrocampo Wetland Reserve again. We moved straight to the second viewpoint where Little Bittern and Purple Heron were showing and Savi's, Common reed and Great Reed Warblers were in song. Back at the entrance Western Swamphen showed again. After coffee we got back on the road getting to Madrid in plenty of time for our flights and to say goodbye to Dennis and Jenny who were staying an extra night.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, LO = Leader only)

N=Near-endemic I=Introduce					May 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
Mute Swan	Cygnus cygnus		✓							
Egyptian Goose - I	Alopochen aegyptiaca							√		
Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata							√		
Gadwall	Mareca strepera	√	√				√	√		
Ferruginous duck	Aythya nyroca					√				
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	√	√	√	√	✓	√	√		
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		,	•	•	,		Н		
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		√		√		√			
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba		•	√	•		√			
Common Swift	Apus apus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus		√	V	√	V	V	V		
Great Bustard	Otis tarda		V		4		10			
Great Spotted Cuckoo	Clamator glandarius				→		3			
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus			Н	✓ ✓		√ -√	Н		
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Pterocles alchata		6	11			'	11		
Rock Dove	Columba livia		0	,	√					
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba nalumbus	,	,	√ /	√ √	,	,	,	,	
European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur	√	✓	✓	√	√	√	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		,	,	,	√	,	,		
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	✓	✓	✓	√	√	√	√		
	Gallinula chloropus					Н		H		
Common Moorhen	·	✓	√			✓		Н		
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		✓			✓		✓		
Western Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio					✓				
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus							✓		
Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus				2					
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	✓	✓				✓	✓		
Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula					✓				
Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos							✓		
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus							✓		
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus							✓		
Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia							✓		
Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola							6		
Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica					√		√		
Black Stork	Ciconia nigra		√	√			√			
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo					√		√		
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	√				√		√		
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus					✓		✓		
Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus					√			√	
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax					√			_	
Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides					√				
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	√				√	√	√		
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	V	√			√	✓ ✓	√		
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		V			√	_ v	√		

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced			May 2023								
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23		
Great Egret	Ardea alba	✓				✓		✓			
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta					✓		✓			
Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus							✓			
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus			✓							
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	✓	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus		√	√	√	√	√	√			
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus		√	√	√		√				
Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	√	√	√	√	√	√				
Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	Aquila adalberti			√							
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata							√			
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	/				√		√			
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus		√			•		•			
Red Kite	Milvus milvus	√	√		√		√	√			
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	√									
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	√									
Little Owl	Athene noctua		√	v	√	V	√	√	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \		
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		√	√	✓ ✓	√	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	√		
European Roller	Coracias garrulus		V	✓ ✓	V	· V	V	✓ ✓	\ \ \		
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		LO	V		,		V			
European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster	 		√	√	√	√	√			
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	V									
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		√	✓	√	✓	√	√			
Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	√	✓		√		√	√			
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus			,			√				
Monk Parakeet - I	Myiopsitta monachus			✓							
Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis	√	,		,			,			
Woodchat Shrike			√	√	√	✓	√	✓			
	Lanius senator		✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓			
Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus			✓		Н		Н			
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius			✓							
Iberian Magpie - N	Cyanopica cooki	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓									
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓			✓			
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Great Tit	Parus major			✓			✓	✓			
Woodlark	Lullula arborea					✓	✓				
Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae		✓		✓		✓				
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla		√		√			√			
Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		√		√		√	√			
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris	√									
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	√									
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	√	√	✓	✓	✓	√	√	√		
Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	•	•	Н	•	Н	Н	Н	, v		
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus							√			
Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus					Н	√	√			

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		May 2023									
Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23		
Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus					√		Н			
Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta							√			
Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides					√					
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		LO			√	√	√			
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			√		Н	√	√			
Western Orphean Warbler	Sylvia hortensis						√				
Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala			Н	√	√	√	√			
Western Subalpine Warbler	Curruca iberiae					√	√				
Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata						√				
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes			Н		Н	√				
Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla				√		Н				
Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	√									
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	√									
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula			√							
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos			Н		√	√	Н	Н		
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			√	√	√	√				
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus										
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius			√		√					
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra				√		√				
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		√	√	√	√	√	√			
Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis		√	√	√	√	√	√			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	√									
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		√	√			√	√			
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs			√		√	√	√			
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes			✓	LO	√	√	√			
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		LO	√	√		√	√			
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina			√	√						
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		√	√	√	√	√	√			
European Serin	Serinus serinus		√	√	√	√	√	√			
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	√	√	√	√		√	√			
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia			√		√					