Spain - Extremadura in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 – 23 April 2016

Report compiled by Byron Palacios



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Naturetrek

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Tour Participants: Byron Palacios (leader) with a group of RSPB Guildford Naturetrek Clients

Summary

There is always a place to enjoy spring and all the wildlife highlights this could bring with it, and certainly that place is the heart of the Iberian Peninsula: Extremadura. The great outdoors, including the lush scenery: dehesas, plains and crags, can produce many surprises, especially in recent years when this season has become very variable. Both resident species and African summer visitors, majestic bustards and a sky always full of raptors: all this and more made this trip such a wonderful experience.

Alongside all the great wildlife observed across the different habitats of the region, our adventure has been complemented by the great service and care of our hosts, great accommodation and wonderful food!

Day 1

Saturday 16th April

London Heathrow - Madrid-Barajas - Extremadura

The group's flight from Heathrow to Madrid-Barajas airport arrived a bit delayed. We soon sorted out our vans and hit the road, heading west along fairly quiet motorways, making a comfort stop half way. Some nice birds were spotted along the journey, alongside good views of the wonderful countryside landscape and of the Gredos Mountains in the background.

We arrived at our lodge Las Canteras in time to check in our rooms and to enjoy our first dinner.

Day 2

Sunday 17th April

Santa Marta de Magasca - Monroy road

After having breakfast in the early morning, we gathered together at the lodge car park, from where we enjoyed watching Little Bustard, Little Owl, plenty of Corn Buntings, Western Jackdaw and White Storks. We eventually jumped into our vehicles and drove towards our first birding spot, with the sun rising ahead of us. We drove up through Trujillo, aiming for the first site to be explored on this morning: the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca. The River Magasca runs north to south near Trujillo, splitting two main branches of habitats, well marked by the typical dehesa (Cork and Holm Oak pasture habitat) and the steppes themselves. The lower basin, where the conjunction of these two main habitats goes across, brought us very interesting birds. A few stops along the access road produced several Crested Larks, Iberian Grey Shrike, Red Kite, Corn Buntings, Spanish Sparrows, Goldfinch, and plenty of Calandra Larks welcomed us to the plains!

We parked our vans by the side of the track and walked along the farmer's road, admiring two male Great Bustards displaying beautifully, with very impressive plumage. We saw lots of Calandra and Crested Larks crossing in front of us constantly, especially Calandra Larks chasing each other and performing on top of the rocks before disappearing in the lush grass. A dozen Great Bustards were pleasantly grazing along the fields while raptors such as Cinereous and Griffon Vultures started soaring in the sky alongside Black Kites, the odd Red Kite, and the beautiful Booted Eagle. Further down the track, a beautiful pair of Montagu's Harriers were spotted flying elegantly near the ground, almost 'shaving' the grassy fields with their nice gliding; suddenly, they

flushed a large group of Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse that were well concealed in one of the fields, giving us amazing views of these two species of sandgrouse together!

We then moved on, driving back to the tarmac track that took us to the village of Santa Marta de Magasca where we had a coffee break, spotting a Bonelli's Eagle in the process. Driving further afield, we made a pre-lunch stop at one of the River Almonte view points, from where we had great views of various birds and the breathtaking landscape. We returned to the village of Santa Marta where we set up our picnic lunch, which we all enjoyed a lot, alongside a Short-toed Snake Eagle that was spotted around. After lunch, the sun was still shinning for us and we continued with our birding circuit, making another stop at a different bridge, much closer to the River Almonte; here we spotted Griffon and Cinereous Vultures and Cirl Bunting, amongst other species. We continued up the road to the Trujillo-Monroy junction, from where we saw displaying Great and Little Bustards, several Montagu's Harriers, Black Kites, and the odd Red Kite circling around. A last stop at the end of the plains produced masses of Griffon Vultures taking good advantage of fresh carcasses, plenty of Corn Buntings, European Stonechats, Calandra Larks and a Red Fox willing to get to the carcass to get a share from the vultures.

We then drove the short distance and back to our lodge in order to take a break and to enjoy a delicious dinner afterwards. We finished our dinner earlier in order to get to the village of Madroñera at dusk, in time to try for European Scops Owl. We succeeded in getting four of these lovely and noisy owls, three of them perched right in the open for all of us to enjoy!

Day 3

Monday 18th April

Monfragüe National Park

The chilly spring morning was clearing with sunny patches - very promising weather-wise! After a relaxing breakfast we set off, driving north along the quiet Roman roads, enjoying the dehesas which looked lush green after the previous week's rains. They were full of Merino sheep and Retinto cattle, two prominent local breeds of livestock of this area. Large groups of Black Kites were spotted alongside the fantastic views of the dehesa. In the Monfragüe National Park, our first stop of the morning was at the point known as Salto de El Gitano (Gypsy Fall) or also known as Peña Falcon rocky cliffs. Dozens of Griffon Vultures, a few pairs of Cinereous Vultures and a pair of Peregrine Falcons were actively soaring around, warming up in the bright sunlight, while some of them were just basking while perched on the rocks. Around the closer rocky pinnacles were lots of active Blackcaps, Blue and Great Tits, Chaffinch and Black Redstarts. A very beautiful Blue Rock Thrush amused us with wonderfully close views as he perched right out in the sunlight, perfect for great shots, a beautiful bird! A pair of Rock Buntings joined the action, and we also had great views of Egyptian Vulture on this site superb site! A lovely Black Stork on its nest completed the treats of the morning!

Although the sun was shining, it was still a bit chilly, so we continued our driving to the village of Villareal de San Carlos, located around the corner, in order to make a quick coffee break before continuing towards the base of the rivers Tajo-Tietar's dam, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch. Beforehand, we made a quick stop along the ravines in search for the shy and overlooked Thekla Lark, which we saw really well, together with a Woodchat Shrike, Woodlark, Southern Grey Shrike and a very beautiful Black-eared Wheatear. Happy with the very productive morning, we got to our picnic site (known as La Tajadilla) where we enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch while enjoying Blue Rock Thrush, Egyptian, Cinereous and Griffon Vultures.

It was time for us to move on and, after a quick comfort stop, we spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the site known as La Portilla del Tietar where we enjoyed of lots of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures occupying the rocky crags and soaring over the rocky cliffs, with Great Cormorants diving in and out of the water. Then the blue sky was adorned by the presence of a beautiful Spanish Imperial Eagle which we saw fantastically well. She perched a couple of times allowing us great and enjoyable views, and more details of her body and plumage patterns were also appreciated in flight! We had superb views of a most-wanted bird of prey, flying and getting near, and on the nest where her chick was being fed. The male was also soaring around, giving us a great show by keeping Griffon Vultures away from their nest surroundings.

After visiting this spot, we started to drive back to Trujillo, making a couple of stops for facilities and birding. We continued to our lodge Las Canteras, near where we enjoyed great close views of the colourful European Bee-eaters. Once in our hotel, we took a break before gathering together for a drink, checklist and dinner.

Day 4

Tuesday 19th April

Madrigalejo (rice fields and marshes)

It was another chilly and overcast morning, but that didn't stop us continuing with our birding plans! We set off, heading south through the village of Zorita to reach the lowest valleys of Madrigalejo in order to check the rice fields and marshes which surround this area. The weather was grey but dry and great for birding. We parked our vans, walking along the dirt tracks and checking the rice fields which produced fantastic birds such as Collared Pratincoles, Zitting Cisticolas, Sardinian Warbler, Marsh Harriers and Southern Grey Shrikes, amongst others. The old railway track which connects with the Vegas del Gudiana trail produced singing Nightingales, superb views of Cetti's Warblers, Tree Sparrows, Purple Heron, European Stonechat and the exotic Common Waxbills and Red Avadavats.

We finished birding on this wonderful site at the right time, as a shower hit the area, so we stopped at a local cafe for a coffee break, before continuing with more birding afterwards, as the rain stopped. We took a walk along the track that leads to the thermo-solar station where a few patches of marshland lie down amongst a beautiful Cork Oak dehesa. We had great views of Great Reed Warbler, Eurasian Reed Warbler, Willow Warbler, Eurasian Hoopoe, Iberian Magpie, and a lovely group of Black-backed Stilt landing in front of us. After this great birding time, we drove back to the nearby cafe again where we set up our lunch under good shelter as solid rain was about to come.

After lunch, we drove back to our lodge Las Canteras as the rain was quite settled in the whole area. We made a quick stop in Trujillo for some shopping before returning to the hotel for a break till dinner time.

Day 5

Wednesday 20th April

Santa Marta de Magasca – Cáceres Plains – Magasca Plains

A day of rain was about to come but we were all positive and full of enthusiasm, determoned to make the best out of the birding spots we were due to visit today. We drove up along the Monroy road, taking a detour into Santa Marta de Magasca where we waited patiently over a nice cup of coffee for the rain to stop. Light patches of blue sky made the morning promising, so we continued to the Cáceres Plains where we had a great birding time,

enjoying the beautiful and colourful European Rollers, some of them shy but others very obliging as well, giving us lots of photo opportunities. We also had beautiful views of Spanish Imperial Eagles, both juvenile and parents, as the juvenile was already flying around the nest. It was a great and long show and we all enjoyed them very much. We also had great views of over a dozen Black-bellied Sandgrouse feeding on one of the fields nearby, amongst male Great Bustards displaying to females, something very impressive and great to see! We also had excellent views of Calandra Larks, Zitting Cisticola, Corn Buntings, Short-toed Lark, Cinereous and Griffon Vultures and Montagu's Harriers, amongst others. After this feast of birds and great sightings, we drove further along the track where we spotted a Cinereous Vulture on the ground, a beautiful male Little Bustard and Lesser Kestrels, amongst other species. We drove back to Santa Marta de Magasca to set up our picnic lunch.

After lunch, and once the heavy rain had passed, we drove to the Magasca plains where we explored another spot along the dirt track, finding lots of Calandra and Crested Larks, Corn Buntings and a beautiful group of male Great Bustards with wonderful light on them for good photos! We moved from this area and continued towards Trujillo on the Cáceres road, making a quick stop here in order to enjoy five beautiful Long-eared Owls roosting by the road. We had fantastic views of the four young owls and one of the adults, a cracking finale of another productive birding day!

Day 6

Thursday 21st April

Arrocampo Dam - Monfragüe National Park

We had breakfast at the usual time and set off, heading north on the motorway taking the exit at junction 21 which leads to the village of Saucedilla in order to visit the marshes of Arrocampo. The weather was a bit cold but dry, great conditions for a promising birding morning in this great location. As soon as we started our walk along the marshes, the squeaky call of Purple Swamphens helped us to locate them rapidly, getting great views of this lovely bird. We also had several Little Bittern which showed off very well and we all had great views of this wonderful and secretive bird. A beautiful male European Penduline Tit nicely perched in front of us for enough time to see him very well and to enjoy this beautiful bird. We also had great views of Marsh Harrier, Zitting Cisticola, European Serin, Spanish Sparrow, Crested Lark, European Kingfisher, Purple Herons, Gull-billed Terns, and the secretive but noisy Savi's Warbler. After spending a wonderful morning in this place, we continued our drive, making a comfort stop just before entering Monfragüe National Park, where we found a nice place to have our picnic lunch, right by the River Tietar bridge. We had great views of European Serin, Booted Eagle, Linnets, and plenty of Nightingales.

After lunch, and within the national park, we found a great array of birds such as Short-toed Treecreeper, Iberian Magpie, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Hawfinch, and the colourful European Beeeater.

Our last stop was another visit to La Portilla del Tietar where we had fantastic views of the pair of nesting Spanish Imperial Eagles; we certainly enjoyed watching them displaying and attempting to charge the Griffon Vultures. We also had great views of Cinereous Vulture, Red Kite and a lovely pair of Long-tailed Tits nesting nearby. It was time to drive back to Las Canteras in order to get ready for another delicious dinner.

Day 7

Friday 22nd April

Trujillo – Las Canteras – Sierra Brava Dam

We had breakfast at the usual time and then we split into two mini groups: the first group staying to do some birding around the lodge, whilst the second visited the town of Trujillo. We then all gathered together at Trujillo's bullring, from where we had fantastic views of Lesser Kestrels, and a wonderfully close view of Booted Eagle.

After this, we drove south to the Sierra Brava Da, where we had our picnic lunch in very nice, warm sunshine. After lunch, we did some birding along the tracks that surrounds the lovely dehesa habitat, where we found interesting birds such as European Bee-eaters, Thekla Lark, Northern Wheatear, Crested Lark, Eurasian Hoopoe and Eurasian Woodlark, amongst others. By the late afternoon we started to make our way back to our hotel in order to rest and get ready for the long travelling day lined up for the following early morning. In the early evening, of course, we gathered together again in order to enjoy our final group dinner, recalling some of the best moments of the week and making a toast to them!

Day 8

Saturday 23rd April

Trujillo – Madrid Barajas airport - London Heathrow

After a very early breakfast, we sorted out our luggage and sadly said ADIOS Y MUCHAS GRACIAS to our hosts at Las Canteras for looking after us in their lovely place throughout the week. We set off towards Madrid-Barajas airport., making a comfort stop along the motorway for a quick break to use facilities and to grab a quick coffee. We arrived at Madrid-Barajas airport in good time to catch our flight.

Once in London Heathrow, we said the proper 'good bye' and wishing our very best to each other, bearing in mind the wonderful time we had together 'wintering' for seven days in the vast and beautiful Extremadura....!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	April							
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	Egyptian Goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca				✓				
2	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Gadwall	Anas strepera		✓			✓	✓	✓	
4	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		✓	✓	✓	✓			
5	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		h		h	✓			
6	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		✓		h	✓	✓		
7	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus						✓	✓	
8	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra			✓			✓		
9	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus						✓		
11	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			✓	√			✓	
13	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea				√		✓		
14	Great Egret	Ardea alba				✓		✓		
15	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta				✓	✓	✓		
16	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			✓			√		
17	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus	+		✓			✓		_
18	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		✓	✓		√	✓	√	
19	Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus		✓	/		✓	1	✓	
20	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus		✓	✓					
21	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus		✓	✓			/	✓	
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle	Aquila adalberti			✓		✓	1		-
23	Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata		✓	, ·					
24	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		,		✓	✓			
25	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
26	Red Kite	Milvus milvus	→	· ·	•	_	· ·	· ✓	✓	-
27	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
28	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	-	✓	· ·	· ·	, ·	✓	✓	-
29	Great Bustard	Otis tarda		✓	_	_	✓	,	,	-
		Tetrax tetrax		V ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
30	Little Bustard			V	•		,		,	-
31	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus				h		h		-
32	Purple Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio		✓		✓		✓		-
33	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus								-
34	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		✓		h		✓		-
35	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus				√	✓			-
36	Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola				√				<u> </u>
37	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius				√		✓		<u> </u>
38	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos				✓		✓	√	<u> </u>
39	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus					✓			
40	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus				✓				<u> </u>
41	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis		✓			✓	✓		<u> </u>
42	Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica				✓		✓	✓	
43	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Pterocles alchata		✓			h			
44	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Pterocles orientalis		✓			✓			
45	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur			h					

						April				
	Common name	Scientific name	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
48	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
49	Great Spotted Cuckoo	Clamator glandarius					✓	✓		
50	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		h	✓	h	h	✓	✓	
51	Long-eared Owl	Asio otus					✓			
52	Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops		✓						
53	Little Owl	Athene noctua		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba			✓					
55	Common Swift	Apus apus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus				✓				
57	European Roller	Coracias garrulus					✓			
58	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis						✓		
59	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster		✓	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	
60	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
61	Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei						h		
62	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni		✓		✓	✓	···	✓	
63	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	+		✓	<u> </u>		✓	_	
65	Southern Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
	•			∨	∨	∨	∨	∨	∨	
66	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator		V		V	V	V	V	
67	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	-		h					
68	Iberian Magpie	Cyanopica cooki		√	✓	√	√	√	√	
69	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	-	√	✓	√	✓	✓	√	
70	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
71	Northern Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
73	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
74	Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus						✓		
75	Woodlark	Lullula arborea			✓				✓	
76	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae			✓	✓			✓	
77	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla					✓			
79	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		✓			✓	✓	✓	
80	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
82	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
84	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
85	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		✓				✓		
86	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus				✓				
87	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus				✓		h		
88	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus				√		✓		
89	Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus				✓				
90	Savi's Warbler	Locustella luscinioides						√		
91	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis	+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
92	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	+		· /			✓		
93	Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia cantillans	+		· /			<u> </u>		
94	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala	+		<u> </u>	✓			✓	
95	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	+			, ,			V ✓	
	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	1	h	✓			✓	V ✓	
96			+	[[]	+			∨	,	
97	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla	 	✓	✓	✓	✓	∨ ✓	✓	
98	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor								

		Scientific name	April								
	Common name		16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
99	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
100	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula						✓			
101	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos			h	✓		✓	h		
102	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			✓			✓			
103	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius			✓			✓			
104	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
105	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		✓		✓		✓			
106	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica			✓						
107	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
108	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
109	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus				✓					
110	Common Waxbill	Estrilda astrild				✓					
111	Red Avadavat	Amandava amandava				✓					
112	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae				✓					
113	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
114	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris		✓			✓				
115	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		✓							
116	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓			✓	✓		
117	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes								✓	
118	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris				✓		✓	✓		
119	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓	✓			✓	✓		
120	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
121	European Serin	Serinus serinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
122	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
123	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia			✓			✓			
124	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus		✓	✓			✓			

Other Taxa

1	Spanish Terrapin	Mauremys leprosa		✓				
2	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes		✓				
3	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	✓	✓				
4	Iberian Hare	Lepus granatensis					✓	
5	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus				✓		