

Spain

Coto Doñana and Extremadura

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Participants:

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European Bee-eater

We had an excellent week of birding despite bouts of inclement weather (a couple of days were very windy with light showers) and our visit to Monfrague Park in Extremadura was foreshortened by heavy rain. The temperature was kept in the lower 20s by unseasonably cold winds, but all in all, we had a great time. We notched up 168 species seeing all the specialities of Doñana, which included Red-knobbed Coot, Marbled Duck, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black-winged Kite, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Great White Egret, Savi's Warbler, Azure-winged Magpie and lots more. In Extremadura the weather patterns were very unusual, experiencing lots of rain during May. This had the adverse effect of nourishing the grass, which had grown very long making viewing of certain species much harder. We saw Great Bustard very well and Little Bustard distantly, Black-bellied Sandgrouse showed well in flight only and Pin-tailed were only noted by call. Our two evening excursions for Red-necked Nightjar were abandoned because of the weather. However we saw Black and Black-eared Wheatears, Rock Bunting, Rock Petronia, Black Vulture, Eurasian Eagle-owl, Black Stork, Crested Tit and lots of Golden Orioles.

Day 1: The group assembled in the arrivals hall at Faro airport around 10:15 and despite arriving from three different destinations there were no hitches when meeting up. After unpacking telescopes and binoculars we were under way in our air-conditioned mini-bus for the journey into Spain. Species we noted during the journey towards the Spanish border included White Stork, Black Kite and Azure-winged Magpie. A planned stop at the border was made at Castro Marim, a 'reserva natural' on the banks of the Rio Guadario. This reserve attracts many waders, terns and gulls in the scrapes made from disused saltpans and the surrounding scrub provides cover for warblers, shrikes, larks and wagtails. Firstly, we sat and ate our picnic lunch as we watched Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola, Goldfinch and a small number of both Common and Pallid Swifts overhead. But as expected, it was waders that came to the fore, with Pied Avocet, Grey Plover, Dunlin, Sanderling, Kentish and Ringed Plovers and Common Redshank all in good numbers with a Stone Curlew being was an added bonus. A few Little Terns were feeding in the shallow

lagunas and White Stork, European Bee-eater, Cattle and Little Egrets and Eurasian Spoonbill were noted in flight. In the scrub we found a nest with four chicks of Sardinian Warbler and in the distance, we logged Western Marsh-harrier, Spotless Starling and Southern Grey Shrike. Our next stop was at the Marismas de O'Diel, which is a huge area of salt pans, wet scrubland, open lagunas, dry heath and miles of saltmarsh. It was at a visitor's centre near the entrance where we stopped first and in the adjacent laguna we saw Pied Avocet, Eurasian Spoonbill, Gadwall, Common Coot, Dunlin, Common Pochard, Spanish Yellow Wagtail and Black-headed Gull. Crossing the road, we 'scoped' the salt pans where large numbers of Greater Flamingos were feeding and on the sandy banks we saw Gull-billed and Common Terns, more Black-headed Gulls, Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Driving further into the reserve, we made several stops where we picked up Little, Black and Sandwich Terns, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone and there were also many Red Knot in brilliant summer plumage feeding with Bar-tailed Godwits. Near the lighthouse point, we surveyed a gull roost which held Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gulls, Sandwich, Common and Little Terns. The wind had picked up considerably and it whipped the sea waves up and over the defence wall soaking the bus at times, so we beat a hasty retreat. On the way back, we stopped to watch an emerging sandbar on the retreating tide, first Sandwich Terns arrived, then Common Terns followed by Little Terns and they were joined by groups of Dunlin and Sanderling. Moving on, we made our final stop on the outskirts of Huelva near the industrial complex and gas-works, not the best of settings for a nature reserve but the birdlife seemed unaffected, as there was plenty to see. A good number of Whiskered Terns formed a loose colony amid a grassy island in the laguna, half a dozen Purple Swamphens were feeding in the reed-fringed shoreline and many other species were noted. It was getting late in the afternoon and as a rainstorm began; we decided to call it a day. As we loaded into the bus we noted European Bee-eater and European Turtle-dove, our last two species of the day.

Day 2: Our first full day in Coto Doñana was spent with trips to three of the most well-known visitors centres, the first being El Rocio. We approached from the south and drove into the town so that we could overlook the Laguna de Madre de la Marisma with the sun behind us. Many Greater Flamingo were feeding in the shallow water along with Eurasian Spoonbill, Eurasian Coot, Common Pochard and a good number of Black-winged Stilts. Cattle and Little Egrets were dotted about, as were Grey Heron and Gadwall. Moving further into town we searched a clump of reeds and found Great Reed-warbler, which showed very well, Black Kites, drifted overhead and were joined with a steady flow of White Storks. Our next stop was the 'ancient woodland' that lies next to the Palacio de Acebrón; it lies within the La Rocina section of the Doñana Reserve. We drove through the heathland to get there and stopped to watch European Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike, Dartford Warbler, Booted Eagle and Common Stonechat along the way. As soon as we emerged from the bus at the woodland we were met by a flourish of bird song. Common Nightingales were prolific, they sang from every corner of the wood, in fact the first bird we saw a very showy individual. We set off on the trail logging Winter Wren, Blackcap, Chaffinch and several Short-toed Treecreepers, all in the first 100 meters. Then over the next hour we watched European Serin, Hawfinch, Blue Tit, more Short-toed Treecreepers and a Black-crowned Night-heron that flew over the pool. Along the main driveway we added Crested Tit to the list and one or two Black Kites drifted overhead. We then set off for the main reserve centre at La Rocina where we visited a number of hides and spent a couple of hours walking the superb woodland boardwalks. The main highlight was a singing Iberian Chiffchaff that took quite a time to track down but showed well in the end. Other highlights included, Purple Swamphen, a reeling Savi's Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, European Serin, Tree Sparrow and more Common Nightingales. We then made a short visit back at El Rocio to search through the Eurasian Coot flock hoping to pick out a Red-knobbed Coot but many of them were far off in the distance so we abandoned the mission and set off for the Acebuche Reserve. Azure-winged Magpies came down to bread and posed for our cameras in the car park at Acebuche and the coffee shop proved very popular with the group, as did the live cam-link to the captive breeding Spanish Lynx, two kittens were delightful in their playful manoeuvres. Finally, we got to do some birding watching! The late afternoon wind had picked up so we restricted our visit to the many hides that overlooked the large laguna de Acebuche. Along the boardwalk we had brief views of Eurasian Hoopoe, Sardinian Warbler, another Booted Eagle and plenty of Azure-winged Magpies. We visited a number of hides where we watched European Bee-eaters, the usual fare on the water and we had very close views of a Little Bittern. We decide to pay one

more visit to El Rocio to search the laguna for the elusive coot and guess what – the Coot was as elusive as ever.

Day 3: Today we drove up through El Rocio, headed east to Villamanrique and then we turned onto to dirt track, which led to the Corredor de Verde. Our first stop was just beyond a bridge where we walked into a field of open grassland dotted with small fir and larger deciduous trees. This was ideal habitat for the Black-winged Kite and was not too long before we were watching a pair of them. What a stunning bird, we saw it perched, flying and hovering like a Common Kestrel. Several other birds put in an appearance included European Greenfinch, Woodchat Shrike and the first of several Booted Eagles. Next we drove back along the trail and followed the Corredor southward towards the northern marshes of Doñana. We stopped at an open laguna that had many dead trees sitting in it. There we notched up Tree Sparrow, Black and Red Kites, more Booted Eagles, Lesser Kestrel, Sardinian Warbler and Eurasian Hoopoe. We heard a Common Cuckoo and overhead there were hundreds of Pallid and Common Swifts. At the end of the dirt track we emerged onto a tarmac road, raised above the surrounding ricefields. Before we searched the ricefields however, we made our way to Dehesa de Pilas, which is a small area just off the main road, which contains a huge square wood of Eucalyptus. There were thousands of birds in the sky, along the hedgerows and on the wires. Hundreds more Pallid and Common Swifts filled the air, European Bee-eaters littered the wires, hundreds of Spanish Sparrows dashed between the hedgerows and the wood. High in the trees and on the pylons dozens of White Storks had made their nests, along the edge of the wood we picked out the nest a Black Kite and could just make out a couple of young chicks in the nest. Seeding of the ricefields had just started and some of them were just being flooded, with many birds along the waterline. Gull-billed Tern and Whiskered Terns skimmed the water picking off insects whilst Cattle and Little Egrets waded through it. Ringed and Little Ringed Plover, White and Spanish Yellow Wagtails, Common Redshank and Dunlin all fed along the waterline. A little further along the road, we stopped to view an Egret colony which held hundreds of Cattle Egret nests. The birds looked resplendent in their summer dress amongst many Black-crowned Night-herons sitting on nests. Our next stop was huge man made lake and designated nature reserve called Dehesa de Abajo. This area holds one of the largest colonies of White Storks in the whole of Spain, which could be seen in the distant dehesa beyond the lake. In the water there were plenty Greater Flamingos, Eurasian Spoonbills, Black-winged Stilts and grebes. All three species were present; Black-necked, Little and Great Crested Grebes. Opposite the lake a track ran off into the ricefields and alongside the track a good stretch of reedbeds can be found. It was therefore the reedbeds that we visited next, driving along the track and parking in the only space available. As soon as we emerged from the bus, we could hear the reeling sound of a Savi's Warbler, with a little coaxing the bird drew very close and put on a fantastic show for us, the cameras were clicking for a good while. Whilst we ate our picnic lunch as we watched distant Western Marsh-harriers working the fields. A Zitting Cisticola was watched building a nest and several Spanish Yellow Wagtails fed on the dry mud of a seasonal pool. Our next stop was at the Jose Valverde visitor's centre, which required a long drive along some bumpy tracks. We made many stops along the way to watch Short-toed Larks and Calandra Larks, a Great White Egret, several Purple Herons and lots of Little and Cattle Egrets. Around the centre we had brief views of a Marbled Duck in flight twice, what a great find! We saw all three grebes again, many ducks and waders, egrets, herons and terns what at this fabulous place. A male Little Bittern in flight was a great delight, lots of Great Reed-warblers screeched from the reedbeds and another reeling Savi's Warbler gave us a brief glimpse. Other birds in view were Glossy Ibis, Pied Avocet, Red-crested Pochard, Grey Plover, Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Dunlin and Ruddy Turnstone. We entered the visitor's centre to take a coffee break and looking through the large plate glass windows we could see a fabulous array of birds in the huge breeding egret colony and what a noise! We searched for the Western Reef-heron, which once again returned to breed with a Little Egret, but alas we had no luck. We took a different track heading back towards El Rocio along which we saw many of the same species as well as several Collared Pratincoles and a Little Owl in the usual spot at the base of a small bridge. Heading back towards the centre, we stopped for a last look at the large open laguna, which gave us views of an Eurasian Hobby drifting overhead. Several short stops on the way home logged an incredible array of raptors including Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Western Marsh-harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Common Kestrel, Black Kite, Black-winged Kite and the

icing on the cake, a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles. What a tally, nine raptors in thirty minutes. We saw many more larks but failed to find the elusive Lesser Short-toed Lark.

Day 4: We decided to travel across the Guadalquivir 'river' today and search for some specialist species around the marshes and salt pans near to Sanlúcar. We were on the road by 08.00 and headed northeast towards Sevilla. Our first stop was at the pine woods near to Hinojos where we looked for Woodlark but saw only European Bee-eater, Common Raven, Azure-winged Magpie, European Greenfinch and Crested Tit. We heard a Common Cuckoo but failed to see it. We then headed for the ferry at Coria and after some time, managed to negotiate the narrow streets and roadwork diversions to join the ferry crossing. We noted Black-crowned Night-heron whilst waiting for our crossing. Once across the mighty Guadalquivir River, we travelled the short distance to the reserve at Brazo de Este where we spent a couple of hours watching a good variety of marshland birds including Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Purple and Grey Herons, Little Bittern, Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt, White Stork, European and Great Reed-warblers, Cetti's Warblers, Common Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola. Some of us watched Yellow-crowned Bishops (female types) but unlike yesterday, very few raptors were seen. The weather warmed up considerably so we headed off to our next destination, the Marismas de Trebujena, which lie adjacent to the river and consists of large areas of open saltmarsh and several large lagunas. It was on one of these that we found five Marbled Duck that were showed well, loosely associating with Common Pochard. A small island held a Little Tern colony, several nesting Black-winged Stilts and a few Pied Avocet. You can imagine the commotion when a Black Kite passed over several occasions, putting up a mass of birds. We had good views of Spanish Yellow Wagtail and overhead notched our second Red Kite of the trip with small number of Griffon Vultures. Other birds present on the laguna included Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Red-crested Pochard, Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls and a fly-by Slender-billed Gull. Collared Pratincoles hawked over the track and we had a brief sighting of a Lesser Short-toed Lark, which was pursued by Kevin who confirmed its identity. After eating our picnic lunch in the bright sunshine, we set off on the short trip through the Algaida woods to the small Laguna Tarelo on the outskirts of Bonanza. The island in the middle of the laguna held a large egret colony with many Cattle Egrets and Black-crowned Night-herons on nests. There were few birds on the water but we did manage to get very poor views of a couple of White-headed Ducks, quite unsatisfactory for most of the group. We then visited the nearby salt pans at Bonanza where we had great views of Slender-billed Gull and several species of wader. At the north end of the pans we stopped to view a large laguna, which had four Black Terns feeding alongside many Little Terns. A commotion drew our attention to an adjacent lagoon where an Osprey was being given an unceremonious 'seeing off' by Black-winged Stilts and Pied Avocets. Our last destination of the day was Laguna de Medina which was a 40 minute drive from Sanlúcar and is just 10km south of Jerez. As we arrived three coach parties of school children were just leaving, perfect timing! The laguna was covered with birds, mainly Common Coot (about 1000), but also Common and Red-crested Pochard, Gadwall, Mallard and several of our target species, the White Headed Duck. A few of these lovely birds were feeding very close to the shore so we all had great views from the excellent boardwalk that had been recently constructed. Three Grebe species were also there (Great Crested, Little and Black-necked). From the reedbeds and the thick scrub along the track came a cacophony of bird song, with many Great and Eurasian Reed-warblers, Cetti's Warbler, Common Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola and Melodious and Sardinian Warblers. Other birds of note were Montagu's Harrier, Booted Eagle and a distant Short-toed Eagle. We left about 17.00 for the long drive back to Matalascanas.

Day 5: An early start with breakfast at 05.45 and we were packed and on the road by 06.30. It remained dark until about 07.15 when a beautiful red and pink sunrise lit up the skyline of Sevilla as we passed through. We recorded twenty-five species of birds by the time we reached Merida where we stopped for a coffee break and just north of this famous 'Roman' town, we left the motorway and headed for Trujillo. We had great views of a perched Short-toed Eagle and noted several Azure-winged Magpies, Eurasian Hoopoes and European Bee-eaters, but the real highlight was a number of sightings of European Rollers, what a fantastic colourful bird. They were perched in excellent sunlight giving a great display. Raptors became more and more prominent, as expected in Extremadura, lots of Red and Black Kites, Montagu's Harriers and Griffon and Black Vultures. On the outskirts of Trujillo, we stopped at a small pool and

recorded Black-winged Stilts, Eurasian Coots, Mallards and White Wagtails. After stocking up with food at the supermarket, we headed out west towards Casares turning off the main road toward Santa Marta de Magascar. Soon, we out on the plains ticking off Southern Grey Shrikes, Calandra Larks, Red-legged Partridge, Thekla and Crested Larks and Corn Buntings. We ate our lunch watching raptor after raptor flying by and also found two Great Bustards, one quite distant and the other within 50 meters of the bus, a great sight as it flew off! A Little Owl on a nearby fence was a real crowd pleaser followed by a brief Short-toed Lark on the track and a Calandra Lark which allowed us to approach within a few meters before it finally flew off. For the rest of the afternoon we visited a number of bridges between Santa Marta and Monroy and between Monroy and Casares, noting Eurasian Crag-martin, Common Kingfisher, Alpine Swift, European Serin, Rock Bunting, Black Wheatear, White Wagtail, Little Ringed Plover, many terrapins and a couple of Dice Snakes. Our last destination was to a site where we were able to watch a nest of Spanish Imperial Eagles with an adult stood over the nest and at least one chick in sight. We pursued the sound of Woodlark until we had sightings of one and in the process discovered the second adult Imperial Eagle perched on a pylon not too far from the nest. We also saw Woodchat Shrikes and Southern Grey Shrikes along the track as we departed for our hotel. We arrived at Finca Santa Marta, our home for two nights, at about 18.00 and recorded Mistle Thrush, Azure-winged Magpie, Golden Oriole, Winter Wren, Sardinian Warbler and White Stork in the hotel grounds! The excellent dinner was enjoyed in a dining room that was the old press room as this hotel is a converted Olive Mill.

Day 6: Getting up and leaving our cosy rooms at 06.00 ready for an early trip to the plains at Belen, we were met by steady rainfall. We pressed on however, and arrived at the plains as the light began to emerge from the thick cloud base. There were many White Storks already feeding in the fields and lots of Calandra Larks singing from on high but the grass on the plains was very long and our target species the Little Bustard was going to be hard to find, if at all. We plodded on for an hour or so making several stops along the lane but the rain persisted and having found just one Little Bustard in flight and several Great Bustards (also in flight) we gave up and headed back to the Finca for breakfast. The rain eased off and with high hopes we set off for the famous Monfrague National Park some 45 minutes away. Our first stop was the Castillo de Monfrague, which is a walled fortress set high up on a limestone ridge. As we climbed the stone steps we noted Eurasian Crag-martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Griffon Vulture and Hawfinch. At the top, and despite the low cloud, there were many vultures in the sky, which included Griffon, Black and a single Egyptian whilst passerines noted included Black Redstart, Blue Rock-thrush, Chaffinch, Winter Wren and Rock Bunting. As we descended, we had further sightings of Hawfinch, Blue Rock-thrush and Rock Bunting and added Blackcap and Rock Petronia to the list. Next, we drove round to the viewing area at Pena Falcon, which overlooks a huge limestone pinnacle on which was perched some 100 Griffon Vultures. Over the next hour we had great views of most of the birds already recorded for that day list and we added Black Stork as we watched a pair attend a nest far below us in an open cave. We made a couple more stops as we drove deeper into the park, seeing Alpine Swift, the impressive sight of hundreds of House Martins nesting under a bridge and a couple of Woodlarks with one of them in song-flight. We ate our picnic lunch on the tables provided at the Mirador de Tajadillo where more vultures were nesting (including a pair of Egyptian Vultures) and where Azure-winged Magpies came to bread. Next we stopped at the Portillo de Tietar (another steep-sided limestone outcrop) on the banks of the River Tietar with many more nests of Griffon Vulture. We parked a hundred meters from the lookout point and as we walked towards it noticed a flock of Long-tailed Tits as well as Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers and a singing Common Nightingale. The vultures did not disappoint us with many perched on the rocky pinnacles and at one stage over 70 came into view over the wooded ridge. A pair of Eurasian Eagle-owls breed on the cliff face most years and this year they had raised two chicks. Both chicks showed well, but there was of sign of either of the parent birds. Rain began to fall whilst we were watching the owls so we decided to move further along the road to view the wooded area, we had excellent views of Golden Oriole and Subalpine Warbler and also noted Blackcap, Common Cuckoo and Black Stork. The rain then increased in intensity so we reluctantly climbed back into the bus and headed for home. We stopped for coffee and visited the famous Plaza in Trujillo but bird-watching was curtailed for most of the rest of the day. At about 19.00 the rain ceased and some of the group walked the sodden tracks around the Finca. What a fabulous setting, rural countryside, flower meadows, olive groves, dehesa and lovely hedgerows. Thirty two species of birds were recorded in 90 minutes by one of the group, a

fitting testament to how good the area is. The best on the list were Golden Oriole, Short-toed Treecreeper, Azure-winged Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe, European Bee-eater, Red-rumped Swallow, Woodlark and Black and Griffon Vultures.

Day 7: Our last full day began with an early start, what a surprise! We set off in the dark at 06.30 and headed towards Santa Marta de Magasca. We spent a wonderful couple of hours on a dirt track overlooking terrific landscapes back-lit by a fantastic pink and red sunrise. The open plains held a great variety of birds and we were soon watching Montagu's Harrier, European Roller, Calandra Lark, Great Bustard and Black Kite. Many White Storks paced the dry grassy fields and in our effort to find sandgrouse we discovered Stone Curlew, Red-legged Partridge, Black-eared Wheatear and a very distant Little Bustard. Have made several stops and had walked a fair distance, we heard the distinctive call of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. First a couple of single birds flew by then a group of five, beautifully lit by the rising sun. We then heard the call of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse but failed to find them on two occasions. Another much closer Little Bustard was seen and many more harriers were watched before we decided to return to the finca for breakfast. A great start to day was the common consensus amongst the group. It was 10.00 before we hit the road again having packed all our belongings and said goodbye to the excellent staff at Finca Santa Marta. This time, we headed north-eastwards towards Madrid. After 25km, we turned off the motorway and drove through Jaraicejo to an area of heathland high up above the plateau. From the heath we had tremendous 180-degree panoramic view southward. We parked at a likely looking spot to search for Spectacled Warbler and within a minute had found one! The bird showed well singing on the bushes for several minutes before flying up into the air and display-flighting. A call of "Dartford" went up and we had similar views of that little beauty too, both birds performed very well to the appreciative crowd for the next 30 minutes. Peripheral but, none-the-less significant birds, included Thekla Larks, Eurasian Linnets, a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Woodchat Shrikes, Black Vultures and a huge flock of some fifty Griffon Vultures rising from the plains below us. We then drove back through Jaraicejo and after a couple of kilometres found a very scenic spot where three generations of bridges could be viewed as they spanned the Rio Almonte. We parked near the oldest bridge and surveyed this picturesque 'beauty spot' whilst listing some very interesting species of birds. Great White Egret was found fishing upstream below the modern motorway bridge, Eurasian Crag-martins darted under the old bridge whilst White Wagtails fed on flies along the stony riverbed. European Bee-eaters joyfully gathered bees on the wing announcing their presence with their bubbly chirp and a Common Nightingale provided the fitting background music. We spent a magical hour there, recording 23 species of birds, the final one being a Black Stork that drifted effortlessly along the line of the motorway until it disappeared beyond the distant hills. Time was advancing quickly so we turned our sights southwards passing the outskirts of Trujillo and then Zorita before stopping just north of Madrigalejo at the old station. There we had great views of European Roller, Southern Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow and Red Kite. We did not linger long and soon were passing through Madrigalejo and onto our final stop near the rice paddies at an old bridge over a small river. We ate our lunch sitting on or near the bridge where we had excellent views of a male Common Waxbill. We also saw European and Great Reed-warblers, Common Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler, Little Bittern and watched a White Stork's nest containing three chicks that were being fed by their bill-clapping parents. It was now approaching 14.00 and we had a four-hour trip ahead of us so we reluctantly departed. The journey was broken by a couple of stops but was otherwise uneventful and we arrived at Matalascanas at 18.00 where we spent 10 minutes seawatching from the cliffs. The only bird of note was a single immature Northern Gannet, which wound up the birding side of the trip. We drove back to our hotel to check-in for the last night and enjoy our last excellent dinner following by lashings of ice-cream!

Day 8: Our last day started at 05.30 when we loaded up the bus, followed by an early breakfast. We set off at 06.30 for the 2-hour journey back to Faro airport where the trip concluded.