

# Spain

## Coto Doñana and Extremadura

9–16 May 2015

### Participants

Elizabeth Cousteix

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Led by Neil Gartshore

The whole week was bathed in clear skies and hot temperatures. 162 species were recorded amongst the group including target birds such as White-headed Duck, Great and Little Bustards, Spanish Eagle, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, European Roller as well as both Little and White-rumped Swifts.

**Day 1** The party met up at London Stanstead at 05.00 ready for the 07.10 Ryanair flight to Faro, arriving on time at 09.50. The van was sorted out and we were on the road by 11.00 heading towards Spain. As usual, the clear roads to our first stop at the Odiel Marshes near Huelva made sure we were there in just over an hour picking up a few birds along the way including Red-rumped Swallow, Iberian Magpie and Spotless Starling. A stop by the small lagoon near the entrance to the visitor centre, just past the salt works depot, added a good selection of birds including Red-crested Pochard (with young), Black-winged Stilt, Kentish and Common Ringed Plovers, a Little Bittern in flight, Eurasian Spoonbill, Yellow Wagtail (sub-species *iberiae*), Pallid Swift overhead and a singing Common Waxbill. A drive along the road into the marshes soon found more waders: Dunlin, Sanderling (10), Whimbrel (20), Eurasian Curlew, Bar and Black-tailed Godwits, Ruddy Turnstone, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank (2) and Grey Plover (30). Other birds of interest included an Osprey taking a stick to a nesting platform, plenty of Zitting Cisticolas and Sandwich (25) and Little (100) Terns. After a couple of hours we turned around and traced our steps back up to the main road and continued on towards Matalascañas. On the way we stopped briefly by a lake to the south of Huelva. Although the views to the water were restricted Whiskered Tern (10), a Great Egret and a Squacco Heron were picked out, also a Booted Eagle overhead and singing European Serin were here. We finally arrived at the hotel (Flamero) at 18.00, adding European Bee-eater to the list as we entered the town. After a settling in/dinner we drove to the end of the town to the boardwalk across the sand dunes on the edge of the national



**European Roller**

park to look for nightjars – not a sign of any birds as it got dark. The only bird of note was a Sardinian Warbler calling from the undergrowth. With the daylight gone it was back to the hotel at 22.15.

**Day 2** The day started with a 07.00 sea watch with everyone drifting down to join Neil on the seafront. Northern Gannets started to appear distantly at 07.25, prior to that two flights of Eurasian Spoonbills (11, 4) came over the promenade. Five Great Skuas and a few Sandwich Terns were also picked up. The most interesting bird of the watch came in off the sea – a nightjar (undetermined species), which promptly disappeared into a piece of scrub behind a locked gate of one of the seafront hotels (but couldn't be located). After a late breakfast and picking up a few supplies we headed off to the El Acebuche reserve. We immediately began to pick up birds – on the way in two Black Kites overhead, a European Bee-eater on a dead tree, then Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Crested Tit, a female Pied Flycatcher and plenty of Iberian Magpies around the parking area. We made our way to the first hide to look for water birds and... nothing, the place was bone-dry! Apparently there had been no major rainfall for three years – we assumed that the lagoon was only filled from rain water as we later found other water bodies held reasonable water levels. Undeterred we checked out a lot of the hides and walked around the boardwalks adding birds along the way: Melodious Warbler, Thekla Lark, Wood Lark, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Hoopoe, Dartford Warbler, Eurasian Golden Oriole, Woodchat Shrike, a male Common Redstart and Spotted Flycatcher. We stayed for a lunch break in the picnic area before moving on to La Rocina. Before going off along the trail we crossed the road to look across the El Rocio marsh – Black-winged Stilt, Collared Pratincole (50), Cattle Egret (2), Glossy Ibis, Greylag Goose and Whiskered Tern here. The walk around part of La Rocina trail, stopping at the first two hides, picked up about 20 Black Kites, 12 Red-crested Pochard, two singing Savi's Warblers (but we couldn't locate them), a Booted Eagle overhead, singles of Purple Heron and Blackcap. We headed back to the hotel for dinner at 19.30 then went out again at 21.00 to the dunes on the northern edge of town to listen for nightjars, but again no luck.

**Day 3** Today we headed off to the east side of the Río Guadalquivir, leaving after a 07.30 breakfast. Traffic around Seville was heavy but kept moving so we made good time getting to the Laguna de Medina, near Jerez, by 10.00. A scan from the viewpoint on the hill found that the lake was almost devoid of birds but overhead European Honey-buzzard (8), Eurasian Griffon (1), Booted and Short-toed Eagles passed by. Despite the lack of water birds we walked around the southern shore as far as the hide – both Eurasian and Great Reed-warblers were very vocal and a number of Zitting Cisticolas were buzzing around. From the hide 50 Great Crested Grebes were counted and three White-headed Duck (2 male, 1 female) were picked up in the distance. Fly by Common Sandpiper, Purple Heron and Collared Pratincole added a little variety. We returned to the van for lunch before heading off to Chipiona, leaving just after 13.00. We found our way down to the sea front near the marina and looked skywards. Picking up swifts and hirundines, each were looked at carefully until our target bird was picked out – Little Swift, in all we probably saw about 10 birds. Leaving Chipiona we retraced our steps and continued on to the Bonanza salt pans, seeing a male Montagu's Harrier on the way. There were a few waders on the salt pans, mainly at the far end – Pied Avocets in good numbers plus a few Sanderling, Black-winged Stilt, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Common Redshank and three Slender-billed Gulls. We continued on, first stopping at the Laguna de Tarelo just inside the Algaida Pine Woods. On the lake the heronry held breeding Cattle and Little Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbill and Black-crowned Night-heron, all with young at various stages of growth. A single Red Kite flew over, a male Little Bittern was picked out in the edge of the reeds and a total of seven (5 males) White-headed Ducks were found, with some aggressive behaviour seen amongst the males. The final stretch of the journey continued along the river road towards Trebujena adding close views of Purple Swamphen (2), a male Marbled Duck and a single Greater Short-toed Lark. It was then on to the motorway to Seville, getting back to the hotel by 20.00 for a late dinner.

**Day 4** Another early sea watch (07.30) amounted to nothing with only 15 Eurasian Spoonbills flying over the beach and Yellow-legged Gulls offshore. After breakfast we made our way to El Rocio and the back road to the start of the dirt track out to the Jose Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre on the northern edge of the marshes.

The journey was broken with frequent stops along the way, eventually arriving at the centre by 13.00. Highlights included a pair of Eurasian Thick-knee, Lesser Kestrel, Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks and Spanish Sparrow. Near and around the centre there was a fair bit of water about – the mixed breeding colony of Cattle and Little Egrets, Glossy Ibis, Black-crowned Night-heron, Squacco Heron and Eurasian Spoonbill was in full swing, we also had excellent views of Great Reed-warbler and Black-necked Grebe, and around 100 Whiskered Terns were hawking over the water. A Savi's Warbler was heard briefly but couldn't be found. After lunch at the centre, we drove down the Coto del la Rey track to the dead end. Less water here but one small pool near a culvert produced close views of Crested, Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Yellow Wagtail, Corn Bunting and Eurasian Linnet all coming down to drink. Other highlights as we made our way back to the main road included Purple Swamphen, Spotted Flycatcher, Northern Wheatear and finally a Short-toed Eagle taking off from a mown field with a snake in its grasp.

**Day 5** We were breakfasted, packed and away by 08.00 heading north to Cáceres – arriving by 12.00. A quick stop at the first bridge, crossing the Rio Guadiloba, picked up Rock Petronia, Common Kingfisher, a singing Eurasian Wren and Eurasian Crag-martins before we moved to the large road bridge over the Rio Almonte stopping there for a lunch break. House and Eurasian Crag-martins and four Alpine Swifts were coming into the bridge and two Eurasian Griffons flew over. After lunch, we carried on over the Cáceres-Trujillo plains, turning off on to the road to Monroy and then on to Sta Marta de Magasca and back to the old N521 road to the west of Trujillo. Regular stops along the way found three more Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Calandra Lark, Montagu's Harrier (male) and Southern Grey Shrike. Once on the N521 travelling towards Trujillo Neil caught sight of a Great Spotted Cuckoo disappearing into the roadside scrub. We arrived at our accommodation at the Finca Santa Marta in San Clemente, south of Trujillo, just after 18.00. Neil and Ian took an evening walk around the grounds before dinner finding a Eurasian Golden Oriole and a Green Woodpecker. Finally after dusk two European Scops-owls were heard calling.

**Day 6** With breakfast arranged for 09.00 we were out by 06.00 on the way to the Belen Plain to look for bustards. As it was getting light, a Little Owl was first heard then seen. We waited for a while then a Little Bustard began calling but couldn't be seen in the long grass. Soon afterwards a Great Bustard flew by landing higher up on a slope some distance away but watchable through a telescope. Then a Little Bustard was scoped standing on a rock, again some distance away – it was mobbed by two Black Kites at one stage. A group of 70+ Common Ravens on a slope beyond the Great Bustard was an interesting record and a Eurasian Thick-knee was first heard then seen before we left to get back for breakfast. After breakfast, we headed off to the Monfragüe National Park, north of Trujillo – first stop, the Castillo, driving up to the parking area just below the cave and then on to the viewpoint overlooking the Peña Halcón cliffs. On the way we had added Mistle Thrush and Western Subalpine Warbler to the trip list and at the Castillo other new birds came thick and fast: Black Stork, Peregrine, Cinereous Vulture, Blue Rock-thrush, Black Redstart, Hawfinch and Rock Bunting were all added. The hirundines and swifts flying around the Castillo were checked carefully and this paid off with two good, but brief views of White-rumped Swift (looking down at them from above). With lunch time approaching, we carried on to the village of Villarreal de San Carlos for a break and after lunch continued along the road through the park heading to the Portilla del Tietar, stopping occasionally along the way – but unfortunately couldn't locate any Black-eared Wheatears. Finally our last stop was at the Portilla del Tietar where a pair of the Spanish Eagles were nesting in a tree on the opposite bank. An adult and at least one fluffy chick could just be made out amongst the foliage. A bird was soon picked up overhead giving great views. After a while the sitting bird left the nest and dropped down into the valley opposite the viewpoint before flying up into the sky. A Red Kite and two close Cinereous Vultures overhead ended a great day as we headed back to Santa Marta by 18.00 for dinner.

**Day 7** Breakfast was taken again at 09.00 giving us time for an early visit to the plain between Sta Marta de Magasca and the N521. Southern Grey Shrike and Eurasian Hoopoe were soon picked up and a close Common Quail was heard (but not seen... are they ever?) As we drove along the road a male Great Bustard

was spotted in a field so we managed to park up and spent a while admiring this speciality of the area. Calandra Larks were in full song all around us and calling Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were picked up, three birds eventually seen. Back by 09.00 for breakfast and packing we were ready to leave Santa Marta by 10.00 – Ian managed to find a Western Orphean Warbler on a final wander on the farm. We drove towards Cáceres on the new road and turned off at the junction that took us back to Sta Marta de Magasca (and eventually back to the N521). Almost immediately we saw what we had come here for – European Roller. Many of the nest boxes have been replaced on the poles and were being used, not only by the rollers but also by Little Owls, Western Jackdaws and Lesser Kestrels. In all we probably saw about 20 European Rollers. Once the habit changed and the rollers disappeared, the drive back to Trujillo proved fairly quiet. Finally we spent just over an hour having lunch in the town square – with Lesser Kestrels overhead – before starting our journey back to Matalascañas at 14.30, arriving by 18.30 to check in for our last night. Two Red Kites and three Common Buzzards were seen on the journey.

**Day 8** Our flight home didn't leave until 15.55 so a final mornings birding was available before we had to head back to Faro airport. A pre-breakfast sea watch (07.30-08.15) didn't turn up a great deal but added Lesser Black-backed Gull to the trip's total along with a few Northern Gannets, a flock of 10 Common Redshanks, nine Sandwich Terns and a single Black-headed Gull. After breakfast at 08.30 and packing we left just after 09.30 and headed to La Rocina for a couple of hours. Once again we could hear Savi's Warbler but couldn't locate it, a fine male Western Marsh-harrier flew close by the hide and Great Spotted Woodpecker, Melodious Warbler and Common Waxbill were also seen. Just after 12.00 we drove around to El Rocio to look over the marsh from the promenade – there were fewer birds than our first visit with 10+ Collared Pratincoles being the best of them. By 13.30 it was time to head back to Faro to check in for the flight home to London Stanstead where the tour ended at 19.00.

**Neil Gartshore**  
**Birdfinders**