

# Spain

## Coto Doñana and Extremadura

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### Participants

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**Rock Bunting**

### Lead by Neil Gartshore

**Day 1** The group met up at London Stansted for our 7.10am flight to Faro, arriving on time at 10.00am. With airport formalities and van hire pickup completed, we were on the road by 11.00am heading to the Spanish border. After a brief stop at a service station to buy lunch and water we soon arrived at the Odiel Marshes, picking up a few birds along the way... including nesting White Stork, Spotless Starling, Iberian Magpie, Red-rumped Swallow and a single pale-phased Booted Eagle. Our first stop on the marshes was by the visitor centre entrance where the water level in the lake and the vegetation on the south side were both very high – a single Little Tern fishing and a female Red-crested Pochard with three young were the only birds of note. The salt pans on the other side of the road held a large number of Greater Flamingo, spread out over the pans in to the distance. Continuing down the road we stopped as and when anything caught our eye. With the high tide, and a slightly later tour date than usual, waders were thin on the ground and we only saw a handful of Common Redshank, two Black-winged Stilt, a scattering of Common Ringed Plover, two Kentish Plover and a single Ruddy Turnstone. A few groups of Eurasian Spoonbills loafing around numbered about 50 birds but the highlights were the birds of prey: a fine male Montagu's Harrier close to the road (and a second male further along), a male Western Marsh-harrier, two Common Buzzards, a Common Kestrel and an Osprey on a nest platform. A brief stop by the lake again on the way out picked up three Western Yellow (Spanish) Wagtails. Next we headed off towards Matalascañas. We had intended to make a short stop at the lakes to the south of Huelva but the police had blocked off the road so we had to make a detour and so couldn't stop there. A Black Kite, another Booted Eagle and finally a small group of European Bee-eater just before we entered town completed the journey list. We arrived at the Hotel Flamero in good time to check in and freshen up before dinner at 8.00pm. In the remaining daylight, we left the hotel at 9.00pm to drive to the end of the town to the boardwalk across the sand dunes on the edge of the national park. A Eurasian Hobby flew over as we got out of the van and a Dartford Warbler was singing as we walked to the viewpoint. As dusk

approached we heard our target bird... a Red-necked Nightjar. We walked back along the boardwalk to where the bird was in full flow - within a few minutes we'd had excellent close views of both a male and female in flight and an obscured view of the male sitting in a tree.

**Day 2** A pre-breakfast sea watch started the day off with three new trip ticks... Northern Gannet (ca 30), Common Scoter (5) and Sandwich Tern (ca 20) but it was generally quiet. A Black Kite quartering the shore gave good views, landing to pick up a dead fish off the beach. After breakfast we headed off to the nearby El Acebuche reserve for the morning. After last year's visit, when there was no water, it was good to see that there had been soon good rains and the pools held some water, albeit less than normal but there was still a lack of vegetation around the pools (i.e. no tall reeds). Common Nightingale, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Cetti's Warbler were all soon heard and Iberian Magpie was plentiful. Melodious Warbler gave good views but water birds were very limited from the first hide... only Mallard and Little Grebe! After the first hide we walked around the western boardwalks soon finding Woodchat Shrike, Crested Tit, Dartford Warbler and a Short-toed Eagle overhead. After the walk we stopped for a welcomed drink at the café before heading to El Rocio. Parking at the La Rocina we crossed the road to view the marsh in front of the town. There were a scattering of water birds here including Glossy Ibis, Squacco Heron, Cattle Egret, Greater Flamingo and Eurasian Spoonbill. A few of the summering Greylag Geese had youngsters but the only other birds of note were two Black-winged Stilt and a single (distant) Whiskered Tern. The temperature was still rising as we approached mid-day so we headed to the Palacio de Acebron for a quick lunch break before heading off on the circular walk around the lake where there was some shade. A Common Cuckoo was heard (but not seen) and Common House-martins were well into nest building under the eaves of the house. The lake was devoid of birds (as usual) but six Pallid Swifts flying low over the water could be clearly identified. We continued to pick up new trip birds on the walk including Spotted Flycatcher, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Blue Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, a single Cirl Bunting, a pair of Common Waxbill and a couple of Common Nightingales showed well. Just before we made it back to the van an Iberian Chiffchaff gave a burst of song but we were unable to get views of it. Returning to the car park by the main gate our final walk of the day took us around the first part of the trail at La Rocina. There were a few birds around the water including Eurasian Reed-warbler and a singing Savi's Warbler (heard but unseen). Numerous Black Kites were up in the air, there were more good views of Short-toed Treecreeper and Common Nightingale and a Blackcap (male) was new for the trip. We arrived back at the van by 6.00pm and headed back to the hotel - Neil catching sight of a Red Kite on the drive back.

**Day 3** A 7.00am breakfast and then we were on our way to the Jose Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre on the Lucio Cerrado Garrido along the northern edge of the park. A brief stop in the pine wood on the way added Eurasian Turtle-dove and Wood Lark to the trip list, and we also had good views of European Bee-eater and Cirl Bunting. Continuing on we made our way to the start of the 26km dirt track to the centre. A lot of finches (European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, Eurasian Linnet) and sparrows (including Spanish Sparrow) were here. As we started along the track a close Common Quail was heard... but not seen, a pair of Montagu's Harrier was quartering the fields, the female (with nesting material) disappeared into one of them close to the road. There were plenty of Black Kites in the air and two Short-toed Eagles were seen sitting on top of pylons, albeit in the distance. Another stop by wet fields, being prepared for rice planting, found a few scattered flocks of Common Ringed Plover (numbering about 300 birds) plus two Kentish Plover, Black-winged Stilts and six Gull-billed Terns. By 11.30am we had reached the park marshes - still well flooded. A good scan around picked up Purple Heron, Western Swamphen and Black-necked Grebe. A flash of blue saw a Common Kingfisher dart by whilst in the air raptors were soaring on the thermals... mainly Black Kite with the occasional Eurasian Griffon. One distant bird was picked up by Simon - pale head and shoulders - a Marsh-harrier? Neil managed to get a scope on it and it proved to be a Spanish Eagle (seen soaring next to a Eurasian Griffon giving a good size comparison). Unfortunately, the bird was drifting back towards the park and the rest of the group couldn't get on it. After this excitement we carried on to the centre for a lunch stop and some welcomed shade. Activity in the heronry in front of the centre was in full swing - Little Egret,

Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-heron and Glossy Ibis were everywhere and a minimum of 12 Western Swamphens gave good views. It was obvious that there had been a lot of flooding during the winter as the water levels were very high and the reeds to the side of the centre looked like they had been completely trashed. After lunch we left the centre and headed along the east track, stopping where we saw any birds of interest. Still more water here, spreading out over the open ground. Familiar birds included Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing and Common Shelduck, mixed in with Black-winged Stilts. A Spectacled Warbler eventually gave good views and Western Yellow Wagtails flitted about. Before we reached the end of the track one of the group was feeling ill so we turned back to the centre and then headed west back to the tarred road... more water and similar birds to those already seen - plus four Great Egrets. Once we reached the tarred road another stop overlooking more flooded fields ready for rice planting found a large group of Black-headed Gulls and Gull-billed Terns (about 150 of the latter with some birds flying back and forth over our heads). We headed back to the hotel, with a single Red Kite seen on the way, arriving back just after 5pm to freshen up before dinner.

**Day 4** Another 7.00am breakfast then we headed off to the east side of the river. Being a Saturday, traffic around Seville was fairly light and we made good time... then missed the exit to the Laguna de Medina and so ended up going into Cadiz to turn back up to the right exit! By the time we were at the lake the sky was clear but there was a strong wind. A scan from the viewpoint showed that the lake was virtually devoid of birds and very choppy. European Honey-buzzard (four) and Eurasian Griffons drifted overhead as we walked around to the hide. It was quiet along the track with warblers providing the most interest: Sardinian, Melodious, Eurasian Reed and Great Reed all heard and/or seen. Out on the lake, 12 Great Crested Grebes, three Black-necked Grebes, a single Western Swamphen and a few Mallards were all we could muster. Leaving the lake, we headed to the coast at Chipiona for a lunch stop and soon found a mixed selection of swifts and hirundines overhead. Our target bird – Little Swift (probably about six in all) – was easily picked out along with Pallid and Common Swifts, Eurasian and Red-rumped Swallows and Common House-martin. After lunch we retraced our steps and headed to the Bonanza salt pans. Again it was fairly quiet for birds but we did find a small number of waders - Sanderling (in summer plumage), Black-winged Stilt, Kentish and Common Ringed Plovers, Pied Avocet and a single summer plumaged Little Stint. A handful of Little Terns and a single Slender-billed Gull flying down the river were the only other birds of note. The next stop was the Laguna de Tarelo just inside the Algaida Pine Woods. The heronry on the lake still held breeding Cattle and Little Egrets, Eurasian Spoonbill, Squacco Heron and Black-crowned Night-heron and a scan over the water soon picked up White-headed Duck (in all we located eight males and two females). The only other bird of note was a single Short-toed Treecreeper in the wood. With time passing we continued along the road adjacent to the river, heading towards Trebujena. A single Red Kite was seen by all, a Booted Eagle was mobbed by a Common Kestrel right above our heads and then the bird of the day. Pulling up to look at some Common Pochard sitting on a bank next to the road we suddenly realised that there were three Marbled Duck besides them! They were very flighty though and almost immediately took off. A little further along another Marbled Duck was swimming out on the open water, giving good views. It was then back to the motorway via a fuel stop in Trebujena. With the traffic light again around Seville we made it back to the hotel just after 7.00pm.

**Day 5** With breakfast again at 7.00am we were on our way north by 8.00am and had reached Cáceres after a brief rest stop by 12.00pm. We made a short stop by the Rio Almonte (Rock Petronia and Grey Wagtail) before our lunch break at the main road bridge over the Rio Almonte. The water levels were high here – the old stone bridge was completely covered. There was a lot of activity around the bridge - nesting Common House-martins, Eurasian Crag-martins and Alpine Swifts were making frequent visits into the bridge. Overhead a flight of Eurasian Griffons passing through were joined by a single Black Stork and were soon followed by two adult Egyptian Vultures. After lunch we decided to head towards Torrejón el Rubio and a site (in previous years) for Black-shouldered Kite. Unfortunately, no kite but a Hawfinch showed well. We made a final stop on the open grassland on the Santa Marta de Magasca road near Trujillo to look for

bustards. A careful scan across the grassland found nothing until Ben looked behind us... and found 10 Great Bustards! A few Calandra Larks were in full song flight over our heads and a single male Lesser Kestrel flew by. A couple of Southern Grey Shrikes and a single Red-legged Partridge completed the new trip birds for the day as we headed to our accommodation at the Finca Santa Marta, arriving just after 17.00. As it was Sunday we had to head back into Trujillo for dinner and found a restaurant with tables outside in the main square - parties of Common Swifts were screaming around the square, the occasional Lesser Kestrel passed overhead and at 9.00pm a flock of a couple of hundred Spotless Starlings were wheeling around. Back at Santa Marta a distant European Scops-owl began to call intermittently at around 10.00pm.

**Day 6** A 6.15am start for a few brave souls – a pre-breakfast dive out to the Belen Plain. As daylight appeared so did a Little Owl on a barn roof then it was a matter of driving along the road, stopping and scanning for bustards. A fine male was picked up by Simon giving good scope views before it took off and flew out of sight. At least three Common Quails were calling in this spot but couldn't be seen. A car load of Dutch birders had seen a group of five Great Bustards but no Littles - we were soon on to the former, more distant than the first bird we had seen but good scope views of them. Having to get back for breakfast at 9am we headed back towards Belen making one more stop for a final scan around. Neil picked up a male Little Bustard flying though. Joined by a second male, they circled around before splitting up, both eventually landing out of sight. We arrived back at Santa Marta for breakfast with a Eurasian Golden Oriole singing nearby. We were off again by 10.00am heading north to Monfragüe National Park. First stop, the Castillo. Before we started the walk up from the parking area we added Rock Bunting and Black Redstart to the trip list, a few Eurasian Griffons floated over and Common House-martins were in large numbers. On the way up two Cinereous Vultures drifted by at eye level. On the top it was fairly quiet and a scan for White-rumped Swifts proved negative. We started back down and reached the van just as a large group of school children were making their (noisy) way up. Scanning the birds against the cliffs before we left, Simon called out a White-rumped Swift which some of the group got on to as it disappeared out of sight. With lunchtime approaching we continued on to the park village (Villarreal de San Carlos). On the way Neil and Lyn caught sight of a Wildcat crossing the road. After lunch we headed out on the north road to the edge of the park - Eurasian Jay and Subalpine Warbler were added to the trip list. Scanning a flight of Eurasian Griffons over our heads two different birds stood out - they turned out to be Bonelli's Eagles, despite their height and the poor light their distinctive features were clear. Returning to the main road we headed east, stopping occasionally until we reached the Portilla del Tietar. Neil caught a brief view of a Black-eared Wheatear disappearing by the road side, despite a search it couldn't be located but we did have excellent close views of a Dartford Warbler. There was the usual small gathering of birders by the Portilla del Tietar who soon put us on to the regular pair of Spanish Eagles usually found here. Unfortunately, their youngster had died on the nest this year but the birds were still hanging around. We had excellent scope views of one of the birds (its head and shoulders) as it sat in a tree on the other side of the water. After a very short time both birds were in the air, giving great views until they drifted away. With time pressing on we retraced our steps out of the park, stopping for a while at the Pena Rock viewpoint. Apart from the Eurasian Griffons putting on a display we had very close views of Black Redstart, including a fine male, Rock Bunting around our feet, Blue Rock Thrush and Subalpine Warbler. By 6.00pm we headed back to Santa Marta for our dinner at 8.00pm. European Scops-owl calling again just after dark.

**Day 7** A lie in this morning... until 7.30am – then a walk around the farm. The highlights of the hour's walk: Eurasian Golden Oriole could be heard singing but proved difficult to see with fleeting glimpses (although Simon and Dawn persevered and were rewarded with better views), Common Cuckoo and Common Nightingale were heard but not seen, three Hawfinches were seen in flight, Wood Lark was in full song and Short-toed Treecreepers gave good views. With breakfast at 9.00am we were packed and away just after 10.00am and headed for the Santa Marta de Magasca road. At the south end of the grasslands, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes and a Eurasian Hoopoe performed well. A short drive along the dirt track road further along didn't find any bustards but a nice male Montagu's Harrier and Greater Short-toed Lark were seen. Just

before we arrived at Santa Marta de Magasca, around 200 Eurasian Griffons were up on the thermals. Once past the village we headed down to the 'roller road'. Never failing to disappoint, we counted a min. of 20 European Rollers on the final stretch of the road before reaching the main Cáceres-Trujillo road, plus a single Red Kite. Then it was back to Trujillo by 1.30pm for lunch in the square and a stroll around the town (Lesser Kestrels and Common Swifts) before heading south (two more Red Kites en route). We arrived back in Matalascañas at 7.45pm to check in for our final night.

**Day 8** As our flight wasn't until mid-afternoon we had the morning free before having to head back to Faro and so went back to El Acebuche. We managed to add another new trip bird here - Thekla Lark and had a good selection of other birds including Little/Black-necked/Great Crested Grebes (in the same binocular view), Dartford and Melodious Warblers, Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Eurasian Golden Oriole. The mosquitos were very bad today (the park staff said it was the worst they had been for a very long time). By 12.00pm we were ready to head back to Faro to check in for our 3.30pm flight back to Stansted. One final new bird for the trip was seen just before crossing into Portugal... a single Carrion Crow, bringing us up to a group total of 146 species for the week.