



## Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

### BOLETAS Birdwatching centre

22192 Loporzano (Huesca) – Spain

tel/fax 00 34 974 262027 or 01162 889318

e.mail: [josele@boletas.org](mailto:josele@boletas.org) // [www.boletas.org](http://www.boletas.org)

Esther Diago Millán - NIF 38493051K

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### BIRD HIGHLIGHTS

TOUR	DATES
Extremadura	25th April to 2nd May 11

Party: Hazel Rous , Sue Pepper, John Goodspeed , Betty Goodspeed , Sylvia Gray , Michael Box , Jeremy Davies , Iga Davies, John Goodhind , Shirley Goodhind , Nigel Duncan , Herman Steangle

Leaders: Josele Saiz , Jesus Porrás, Harry Barnard

Total Number of Species : 143

### TOUR REPORT

Once again, Boletas produced an extremely successful tour, encompassing truly spectacular scenery with a splendid sample of the rich biological diversity that Western Spain has to offer. The sheer concentration of high quality species surely merits Extremadura's consideration as one of *the* great European birding destinations. 143 species were recorded, with virtually all possible specialities seen well. Amongst the many highlights were, spectacular and prolonged views of a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, 5 Bonelli's Eagles, 5 Black-shouldered Kites, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, a profusion of both Great and Little Bustards, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Red-necked Nightjar, White-rumped Swift, Black Wheatear and Western Orphean Warbler.

The tour incorporated a plethora of diverse habitats. The wonderful Dehesa, predominately pastures, studded with Holme and Cork Oak, harbouring a wealth of Southern European specialities, such as Azure-winged Magpie, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Red-necked Nightjar and Black-shouldered Kites. The extensive wetlands of Arrocampo, with vast beds of Juncus and Phragmites, supporting important populations of Little Bittern, Savi's and Great Reed Warblers, in addition to Purple Swamphen. Dramatic rock faces. Stark Mediterranean scrub, carpeted by Spanish Lavender, Cistus and Thyme and the impressive gorges and verdant water courses of the Monfrague National Park, which amongst many highlights offered phenomenal views of a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles.

The second half of the tour focussed predominantly upon the vast grassland plains or Steppe habitat of La Serena, which offered splendid views of displaying Great and Little Bustards, multiple encounters with both sandgrouse species, large flocks of Collared Pratincoles and swirls of ghostly male Montagu's Harriers displaying above the pastures. Another most delightful feature of these environs being the constant backdrop of lark song. The final day's birding involved a visit to some impressive rocky hills and a spectacular Moorish castle, which provided excellent studies of Black Wheatear and a healthy colony of Alpine swifts.

### Day One April 25th

An afternoon rendezvous at Madrid Airport saw the punctual arrivals of the various flights and Josele and Jesus greeted their guests. Following lunch the group assembled outside Terminal Four in order to conduct the necessary introductions and discuss the afternoon campaign. A southbound journey of some two and a quarter hours was necessary to reach our base for the next four nights: a small rural village surrounded by wonderful Extremaduran habitat, located close to Trujillo. The first leg of our journey between Madrid and Oropesa provided first encounters with a number of interesting species, which included White Storks, Red-legged Partridge, Eurasian Hoopoe, Red-rumped Swallow, Cattle Egrets, Spotless Starlings, numerous Black and Red Kites, Marsh Harriers, Booted Eagle and Black-winged Stilt. A refreshment stop was scheduled and duly conducted at Oropesa, where a splendid cafe-bar, located within the walls of the town castle, offered some excellent birding as well as well as tasty refreshments. Fine views of a female Lesser Kestrel, perched on the overhang of an adjacent church roof, were achieved, whilst a striking male Black Redstart sang atop one of the many turrets. Our first encounters with Serins in display flight vied for our attention with screaming swirls of Common Swifts streaking overhead. Hirundines were well represented with Barn and Red-rumped Swallows, as well as House Martins, which were interspersed by a smaller representation of Eurasian Crag Martins. The group were afforded excellent studies of these endearing creatures as they perched from time to time below our vantage point. Scanning the skies also yielded a number of Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles, Black Kites and more Lesser Kestrels, before our first Black Vulture was spotted.

The final section of the journey was undertaken in true Extremaduran habitat, providing our first Montagu's Harriers, European Bee-eaters and European Stonechats. Arrival at Herguizuela in the early evening offered a little time to freshen up before the evening meal and once everyone had been successfully located in their respective guest houses there was sufficient time to do some independent birding. Exploration of the village and its immediate vicinity yielded some interesting species including numerous Serin and Corn Buntings, whose dry rattle provided a constant backdrop in the old pastures and overgrown orchards. European Stonechat, Iberian Grey Shrike, a couple of Sardinian Warblers and most impressively the first Azure-winged Magpies of the tour were noted, before returning to base for the evening meal, a most pleasant affair, well complemented by copious supplies of the local vino.

### Day Two April 26th

Some members of the group took a pre-breakfast amble and were rewarded with a number of notable species. Zitting Cisticolas were very much in evidence, as were several Sardinian Warblers. Two male Common Cuckoos, in fine voice and full view, were upstaged somewhat by a third giving an interesting quavering vocalisation. Eurasian Hoopoes called almost continuously, whilst a Woodlark performed its energetic flight display above the Olive clad slopes. The mellifluous delivery of multiple Rufous-Nightingales provided a wonderful atmosphere from first light, when the first Woodchat Shrikes, with their fine bay caps and subtly peach-washed underbellies, were thoroughly enjoyed. A somewhat less expected sighting was a flock of at least 10 Common Waxbills, which were observed feeding in the pasture adjacent to the guest house.

Following breakfast, a visit was made to the historic city of Trujillo, where the group explored the cobbled streets and made their way to a wonderful mirador within the confines of the ancient castle, which divulged panoramic views of the spectacular Extremaduran landscape. Here it was possible to observe numerous singing Black Redstarts, a number of very confident male Serin and many a precariously situated White Stork's nest, as well as to admire the large Lesser Kestrel colony, for which the city is renowned. Swifts were the predominant avian focus of the visit and they did not disappoint.. large, screaming waves of Common were interspersed by the highly sought Pallid and on at least three occasions the group appreciated fine views of these localised birds, permitting excellent study of their pertinent identification features.

Amongst the myriad of hirundines also present, there was a relative abundance of Red-rumped Swallows and reasonable Crag Martin numbers. Raptor watching across the distant plains revealed several Short-toed Eagles, our first Egyptian Vulture and several Black Vultures amongst the numerous Griffons. Eurasian Hoopoe called repeatedly atop one of the many turrets, whilst a Great Spotted Cuckoo was heard and then seen briefly in flight, within the confines of a walled garden right by the vehicles, as it zipped across and promptly vanished behind some tall Cypress trees.

Warblers were the next objective and so a half hour drive was undertaken to reach a suitable site. The focus area being a stretch of now redundant road, which incorporated an old bridge across a small channel and some lush herbaceous habitat, excellent for a number of interesting passerines. No sooner had the group stepped out of the vehicles than a Cetti's Warbler's rendition exploded from the waterside shrubs. The bird proved elusive but showed on a couple of occasions much to the delight of Herman. This was followed swiftly by the detection of a

vociferous, but somewhat elusive Melodious Warbler, which worked methodically between a pit of impenetrable bramble and several dense bushes lining the depression. Here too was a highly vocal and extremely conspicuous Nightingale. A Subalpine Warbler was then heard singing from the cistus scrub on the opposite side of the road. Some brief and decidedly mediocre views were obtained by most, although the individual revealed itself well to a few members of the group, as it flitted between low stems and the barbed wire fence. During the vigil for the Subalpine, the only Yellow Wagtail of the tour was observed in flight, calling loudly as it passed. Our main target here, the Western Orphean Warbler, initially proved typically skulking, but after several minutes it afforded excellent views at extremely close quarters, singing from an exposed perch. Here we recorded several Bee-eaters, Eurasian Jay, Short-toed Eagle, more excellent studies of BlackVulture, Booted Eagles of both pale and dark morphs as well as the first Black Stork, a non-breeding adult, which circled for sufficient time for the subtle iridescent green and bronze tones and slightly subdued red of the bill and legs to be noted.

Lunch was taken in a small pleasant restaurant, ideally situated just a few kilometres from the next birding site. From here we headed to an area of coarse scrubby habitat, interspersed with beautiful carpets of wild flowers. Unseasonal rains had turned this often dry, uniform environment into a riot of colour; intense purple swathes of Spanish Lavender combined with vivid yellows and the scent of thyme made this a most wonderful site. The clear warm weather resulted in a noticeable shimmer, but Iberian Grey Shrike and numerous Crested and Thekla Lark were seen well, both perched and in display flight. Here we achieved success first with Dartford Warbler and then our intended target the Spectacled Warbler, which afforded excellent scope views on several occasions. From our observations at least two pairs were deemed to be present.

Mid afternoon saw the temperature rising and so an excursion was taken into the Monfrague National Park. A couple of hours were spent scanning across the gorge. Amongst the many interesting sightings here were Blue Rock Thrushes in full voice and plain view, as were at least four Black Storks, a pair of which were nesting on a rocky outcrop directly below the observation point. A number of spectacularly adorned Rock Buntings were detected on the rocky hillsides. A sizeable Griffon Vulture colony was most impressive, as were the number of hirundines. Three Egyptian Vultures were noted and an interestingly slender looking swift was seen all too briefly, zipping around the rock face. The local Peregrine Falcon was excellently located by Jesus just as we were leaving the site.

The intensity of the heat had taken its toll and so a decision was taken. Those wishing to return to the guest houses in order to freshen up and relax before dinner could head back with Jesus, whilst Josele's group ventured into the grasslands, where they recorded a number of speciality birds including Great and Little Bustards, Calandra Lark, Montagu's Harrier and Common Quail.

Jesus offered a further excursion in the evening in some extraordinarily beautiful Dehesa habitat, which consisted predominately of Pyrenean Oak forest. Some superb birding was to be enjoyed here, Rock Petronia being virtually the first species noted upon arrival. These sparrows display an interesting breeding biology, with the Extremaduran population nesting in cavities in ancient trees and not as the name suggests in crags and crevices of rock faces. Eurasian Nuthatch and splendid studies of Short-toed Treecreepers were graciously accepted as was Grey Wagtail, creeping along the fringes of a small pond, brimming with Spade-foot Toad tadpoles. Jesus was again in inspired form locating both Red and Fallow Deer on the distant wooded hillside, before scoping an Egyptian Vulture feeding on the ground. The concentration of Woodchat Shrikes in this area was truly astounding, as were the views obtained of several Hawfinches. Azure-winged Magpies were wonderfully abundant and so too were Red Kites, with eight individuals noted during the walk. Nightingales again delivered a delightful serenade as the birders headed back for dinner.

### Day Three April 27th

A journey of about an hours driving was necessary to reach the Monfrague National Park. Here the intention was to spend a full day focusing on the area's specialities. The abundance of Bee-eaters, Woodchat Shrikes and in particular Corn Buntings along the drive was again remarkable.

Several Rock Petronias were located and they permitted splendid views on the tarmac surface, before retreating to the fence-line and ultimately the cover of the oaks. Hoopoes too were frequent and several distant Blackcaps could be heard. Arrival at our first observation point rewarded us with immediate flight views of Black Stork as well as a nesting pair on the rocky ledge opposite. Here too we were treated to further encounters with Rock Bunting and Blue Rock Thrush as well as the "Irbii" Iberian race of Long-tailed Tit, which appear decidedly more sinister with their smoky facial patterning. It wasn't long before perhaps the star bird of the day was located, an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle, which granted scope filling views as it perched in the highest reaches of an oak, directly across the gorge. This species is one of the world's most threatened raptors,

with a little over 250 pairs occurring in the wild. Behind Andalucia, Extremadura boasts the second highest concentration of breeding pairs and so to see something so spectacular and critically threatened proved to be an inspiring experience. The bird was soon joined by a second and the sexual size differentiation could be well assessed as they soared above the ridge and then directly above the group for the next ten minutes. A juvenile Eagle Owl was located and although initially it proved a challenge to observe, owing to its location beneath a dense patch of scrub, it was eventually enjoyed through the scopes by everyone.

A British gentleman informed us that he had seen White-rumped Swifts inspecting old Red-rumped Swallow nests the previous day, but despite extensive searching we were unable to locate this sought-after species. Although abundant in Sub-Saharan Africa, it remains an extremely uncommon species further north with Spain being its Western Palearctic stronghold. Since the 1960's it has been recorded in increasing numbers and although undoubtedly very uncommon its affinity with high distant ridges arguably results in a lower detection ratio than is truly representative of the species level of abundance. In compensation however, the group discovered a singing Rufous Bush Robin, which was initially observed as it flashed across the road. It then continued to sing unseen from dense cover down slope of our position, but unfortunately, despite a concerted effort, the bird did not re-emerge. However, it was a most satisfactory record of a species seldom recorded in the area. From here we retraced our tracks for a short distance before stopping for refreshments at a wonderfully situated cafe. As the group enjoyed their coffee, three distant birds drifting purposefully in our direction proved to be quite a combination. The leading bird transpired to be a Black Vulture, with excessive feather damage in the right wing, followed by the pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles we had seen an hour earlier. Unfortunately the breeding attempts season of this particular pair had ended in failure, yet to behold these immensely powerful birds gliding gracefully across the azure sky left a profoundly positive impression.

A short but highly productive walk was then taken in the Dehesa surrounding the cafe. Fine views of Rock Petronia, several slightly more elusive Orphean Warblers, European Bee-eaters, Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch and several Common Cuckoos were seen. Also of interest was the discovery of a juvenile Ocellated Lizard, whose efforts to remain concealed beneath a dried cow-pat were not overly successful. From here we travelled deeper into the park, to eat lunch at a restaurant before taking a leisurely stroll. This walk was extremely enjoyable with Thekla Lark, more Subalpine and many Sardinian Warblers being noted, before fine scope views of a vocal Western Orphean Warbler were enjoyed by many. The descent to the lush river valley with Alder and Poplar clad banks and dense low growing vegetation with stands of Hemlock afforded fine views of more Iberian Long-tailed Tits and a family of Short-toed Treecreepers. The whole stretch was excellent for butterflies and one of the undoubted highlights proved to be the multiple observations of Spanish Festeons. The verdant watercourse also provided the first encounters with Golden Oriole. Their delightfully fruity songs echoed through the valley and soon led to the discovery of three male birds in full territorial dispute, chasing between the Aspens and affording occasional scope views. At the small ford several Rufous Nightingales were noted and Jesus located several Iberian Newts beneath the large stones in the channel. The next objective was Bonelli's Eagle, so the cool shade and tranquil surroundings were reluctantly abandoned in pursuit of our quarry. The Bonelli's site proved rather productive with several Black Vultures, many Griffon's, Booted and Short-toed Eagles being noted. Interesting passerines were also well represented with a pair of Grey Wagtails, Blue Rock Thrush, Subalpine Warbler, ubiquitous Corn Buntings and several stunning Rock Buntings. Another strikingly adorned emberiza, which was initially heard and then excellently spotted by Herman, singing at mid level in a nearby tree was a glorious male Cirl Bunting. Despite intense efforts, only Linnets, Greenfinches, more Woodchat Shrikes, more flight views of Black Storks and Common Ravens were achieved. The Bonelli's were proving elusive, so the decision was made to depart in search of a few more birds en route to the hotel. Just a short distance later however, Jesus spotted a distant soaring Bonelli's, which got closer and closer, presenting those in his vehicle with very acceptable views of this rare and majestic creature, before it soared away over a distant ridge. An early evening arrival to Herguizuela was made in preparation for an early start the following morning. This however was not the final action of the day, as following dinner a perfectly conducive, still, balmy evening offered the potential to do some night birding. The last half hour of light resounded with a wonderful chorus of abundant Nightingales along the lanes close to our guest houses. Here we stood and waited patiently. At first the distant calls of the local pair of Long-eared Owls were all that could be heard. After a few minutes the distinctive "galloping" song of our quarry, the Red-necked Nightjar became audible, its vocalisation grew in volume until the bird was suddenly spotted drifting elegantly along the treeline, up-slope of our position. It remained in view long enough for all to obtain good binocular views of this sought after caprimulgid before it swept behind a tall stand of pines and disappeared. A trio of European Scops Owls could be heard calling and indeed a particularly vocal male was located in a lone pine by the roadside in a walled garden. The bird was extremely difficult to see and although it perched up a couple of times, a dark

unidentifiable silhouette shooting between the densely needled branches constituted the best views for many. Driving the lanes for the next half an hour produced several interesting creatures with Spade-foot Toad and a remarkable cricket being amongst the finds. Back in Herguizuela a Little Owl called a couple of times at some distance as the group made its way back in anticipation of another wealth of exciting birds the following morning.

Day four April 28th

A first light departure to Zorita was necessary in order to target some of the special birds of the tour. Here, as the sun rose, the first Montagu's Harriers could be seen ghosting across the motionless cereal crops and pastures. A single Stone Curlew was spotted and Common Quails uttered their distinctive song with regularity. Marsh Harriers and three Hoopoes flew across during the short walk to the vantage point. From here the first birds noted here were adult and third calendar year Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Scanning the distant fields, several distinct "white foam" patches were discovered, before a flock of some 15 or more Great Bustards were located much closer. A swift retreat to the vehicles, followed by a five minute drive, enabled everyone to enjoy exceptionally close views of these truly enigmatic birds. Everywhere Calandra Larks performed their wonderfully complex song flights and several displaying Short-toed Larks vied for our attention. At least four of the much smaller, but equally spectacular, Little Bustards infiltrated a flock of more than 40 Great Bustards. Indeed a particularly conspicuous male Little Bustard took up full scope frame along with at least half a dozen Great, all the time performing his bizarre "leap and raspberry" routine. The female Great Bustards showed utter indifference to both him and his more sizeable cousins. In any event the group were thoroughly impressed!

A much needed and well earned breakfast was in order and it was a most enjoyable occasion as the group prepared for another action packed day. The objective was to visit the Tajo River, an area offering fine birding and exquisite scenery, to explore the Arrocampo Wetlands and to seek out the elegant Black-shouldered Kite, our ultimate focus of the day. The Tajo River provided the exhilarating spectacle of a thriving House Martin colony, beneath the arch of the bridge crossing the river. Here several hundred pairs happily coexisted. Their mud-cup nests layered almost like tower blocks, owing to space restrictions. Here too were Black and Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles and remarkably, as it transpired, the only Eurasian Sparrowhawk of the tour: a male, which drifted over whilst Golden Orioles sang from the riverside plantations.

A concerted effort was made at an abandoned restaurant to locate these Orioles, as they had proved somewhat elusive to many the previous day. Here again moderate success was achieved, with a male taunting us briefly before plunging down the slope and away. The warmth of the day had now become oppressive, so we retraced our steps and climbed up to a splendid vantage point at the Miravete Peak. This delightfully high quality road is now greatly underused due to the construction of alternate direct road links. This has bankrupted many small enterprises reliant upon its use, but at least the wildlife seems to flourish in its abandonment!

The peak offered unrivalled vistas across Monfrague and the glorious Extremaduran landscape, as well as refreshingly cooler air temperatures than those in the valleys below. The wildlife here was also most interesting. The first species recorded was a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. A female, spending much time bounding around on the stony outcrops by the roadside, presenting all with fine views. This is a scarce species, occurring only on passage and as a breeding bird in the Gredos Mountains. In the pines, Coal Tit was heard several times and Red-rumped Swallows plus Rock Buntings added further to the entertainment. Raptor observations were a little disappointing here, with many interesting repeats, but no news species recorded. This area also yielded many Scarce Swallowtail butterflies, which could at times be observed in direct comparison with the more familiar European version. Crested Tit was heard calling and so a short journey into the pine forest below our position by the radio mast was made in order to locate this localised bird. It didn't take long before this somewhat flighty and highly active creature was fluttering tantalisingly in the trees above us, continuously delivering its distinctive vocalisation. More Scarce Swallowtails and an interesting Oil Beetle were noted here amongst the pine needles. A pleasant lunch was enjoyed before heading for the Arrocampo Wetlands in the early afternoon. Here we were welcomed by a profusion of European Bee-eaters, seemingly clad in all the colours of the rainbow, which had established a colony in the sandy banks opposite the parking area. A number of Zitting Cisticolas could be heard, whilst Great Cormorant, huge numbers of Cattle Egrets, interspersed with the occasional Little Egret and vociferous Cetti's Warblers were logged. Here the group spread out somewhat to cover the large stretch of marsh and reed fringed pools. Spanish Sparrows were seen well and many White Storks were also noted. An extremely vocal, but skulking Great Reed Warbler eventually surrendered for the briefest of instances, before concealing itself once more. A Black-crowned Night Heron

drifted across the road and a single Gull-billed Tern was seen. This area held several Savi's Warblers and eventually scope views were attained by a few, as a particularly visible individual sat high in the phragmites across the pool, showing its orange gape as it "buzzed". Purple Herons were splendidly common here and in excess of 5 individuals were noted in this short time. Jeremy and Iga found a Common Sandpiper and Sue saw a male Little Bittern gliding away over the reeds. The afternoon became unbearably hot in this open environment, so the group took refuge in the nearest town, enjoying ice creams and other thirst quenching refreshments. During our break at the local bar, the elderly natives, adorned in their finest attire, became decidedly heated, with much gesticulating and a great many accusations of cheating, during an increasingly intense card game, which served to hasten our return to the field!

Driving back to the wetlands our quarry was sighted. A Black-shouldered Kite, right by the roadside. Parking in the entrance to a solar panel farm we were able to enjoy sensational views of a pair of these aristocratic raptors for over half an hour, as they hunted, gathered nesting material and indeed perched in and above their nest. Another individual was then noted as we headed to a new area of the wetlands in the hope of more of the areas' special birds. Here in the reed-clad channel by the road a furtive Squacco Heron sat motionless for several minutes, before gliding across and peering cautiously from the reeds. A Purple Swamphen was spotted feeding on the far side of the channel, but it disappeared all too quickly. Despite intense searching, a brief flight view was afforded only to Sue and Hazel. More Savi's and Great Reed Warblers sang purposefully and yet another Black-shouldered Kite was observed. As we prepared to depart, another Purple Swamphen was spotted, allowing many to observe this exotic Galliform as it fed, stripping away the roots and shoots of the aquatic vegetation. Its enormous waxy bill and matching ruby legs contrasting with its stunningly vibrant bluish-purple plumage. The final site visited at Arrocampo proved to be possibly the highlight of the day. Jesus wandered off the trail a short distance and located, beneath a log, a pair of Pygmy Newts, arguably one of Europe's most beautiful amphibians. These stunning creatures were the start of a truly special half-hour. Next came an unbelievably conspicuous Savi's Warbler, only twenty feet away and just below eye level, a bird enjoyed in the scopes by everyone. Another Black-shouldered Kite was seen before another Purple Swamphen was located, allowing many the opportunity to catch up with this surprisingly inconspicuous bird. A few seconds later, a male Little Bittern appeared, no doubt disturbed by the movements of the Gallinule. It clung to the reeds looking decidedly inconvenienced for the best part of three minutes, before he and his partner flew up and above the line of the reeds for fifteen seconds, before turning sharply and retuning from whence they came. This had been a superb half-hour, recovering a number of difficult target species right at the death. With the song of Quail issuing from the grassy bank to our right, the group returned to the vehicles and made their triumphant journey back to base.

#### Day Five April 29th

The fifth morning saw an unfortunate change in the weather: clouded skies threatening rain. So, as this was essentially a travel day, we decided that some birding should be done in the Dehesa, close to Herguizeula, whilst the weather held. We departed our comfortable guest houses and the elusive Common Waxbills put in another appearance as we loaded the vehicles. The proposed area had been previously explored by several members of the group in the evening of day two and offered many of the special birds sighted previously. Rock Sparrows were seen well in addition to at least five Woodchat Shrikes, several Eurasian Nuthatches, Short-toed Treecreeper, Grey Wagtail and Common Sandpiper, whilst a couple of Red Kites soared over. The Red Deer were again present, feeding on the distant hillsides and although only tantalising flight views were achieved initially, our search was eventually rewarded with some wonderful observations of a pair of Hawfinches by the vehicles. From here a journey to Garciaz for refreshments, including some rather enjoyable pastries provided by Josele, continued through Zorita to a large rock face, home to a pair of Bonelli's Eagles. A few Griffon and Black Vultures were noted before a single Bonelli's was sighted against the ridge. The bird was promptly joined by a second and the two patrolled the scrub laden slope for the next five minutes or so. After a short time these majestic birds began to drift towards us and were soon soaring directly above the vehicles where we stood on the grassy track. The group enjoyed stunningly close encounters with these highly prized birds. As the weather threatened to deteriorate further, we decided to head South, satisfied with the excellent studies of the Bonelli's. The next scheduled stop involved a visit to an interesting site renowned for its fine array of water birds. Sightings en route included the outrageously colourful European Roller, which was to be seen in good numbers during the coming days. The entrance road to Balsas de Hito offered more views of the splendid European Rollers as well as the wonderful colonies of Spanish Sparrow coexisting within the nests of the White Storks. The site incorporates a series of marshy fields, some dense herbaceous edges and ditches and a sizeable excavation, which contains a combination of silted islands with low vegetation and open water. The large

neighbouring rice fields provide refuge to over thirty thousand Common Cranes during the winter period. The Regional and National Government have recently permitted the construction of enormous solar farms on these vital wintering grounds. It is a terrible tragedy that this site will cease to be of real ecological value in the coming years, displacing these huge wintering flocks of Cranes entirely. Even during our short visit, bulldozers and construction workers were busy levelling and tearing up the earth in preparation for further development, including a new road network. Aside from the depressing nature of this inevitable destruction, the site was a veritable goldmine. Flocks of the gaudy Red Avadavat, an introduced species from the Indian subcontinent, which obviously flourishes here, were observed in abundance. Our first sandgrouse of the tour came in the form of four Black-bellied, which took flight from one of the few intact fields as we arrived. A minimum of eight Collared Pratincoles were located and, on closer inspection, a fabulous mix of Little Ringed and Ringed Plovers was found to contain a single Kentish. Unusual, or unexpected species included Eurasian Teal and Common Pochard, whilst three Gull-billed Terns, a solitary Black-headed Gull and Northern Shoveler were noted. A singing Melodious Warbler posed atop a Sallow as the group viewed from the embankment. Great Reed Warbler was also seen. Close inspection of the adjacent fields revealed several Stone Curlews, which, though cryptic, eventually showed quite well. Upon leaving this site, an unexpected migrant female Common Redstart was seen perching along the fence line and Nightingale and Common Cuckoo were also in attendance. Lunch was taken at a waterside restaurant, with a thick stand of Eucalyptus around. This offered both a hearty meal and the opportunity to observe the sizeable Azure-winged Magpie colony, located in the immediate vicinity. With the weather clearing, a short drive was made to reach the Rio Zujar, with a notable sighting being the Little Owl, sighted and called in unison by Hazel and Herman, giving Jesus something of a shock in the driver's seat! This area, with naturally flooded riverside pools and several gravel excavations, provides ideal habitat for water birds and bank nesting species alike. Here, hugely impressive colonies of both Sand Martin and European Bee-eater were enjoyed, with over three hundred and fifty pairs and fifty pairs respectively. A Little Owl was scoped atop a distant ruined building, much to the delight of Herman, whilst a single Hobby was seen in flight and Marsh Harriers drifted across the river. Cattle Egrets, Grey and at least two Purple Herons were also seen well, hunting on the fringes. These riverside pools offered yet more quality sightings, with a Great Egret hunting in the shallows and a pair of Red-crested Pochards skulking amongst the vegetation in the centre of the pool. Other species new for the check list included Eurasian Coot and Common Moorhen. A Common Kingfisher entertained us, perching frequently, an encounter which was thoroughly enjoyed, as many of the group had not observed this species the preceding day at the Arrocampo Wetlands. After a short drive we explored a site known to the leaders, in search of Penduline Tit. Calls of a male bird were heard almost immediately and after a lengthy search of the dense Sallows the bird was sighted well twice, then briefly in flight, before vanishing. It continued to call intermittently, but somewhat frustratingly, remained hidden. Approaching from a different angle, Josele discovered a tiny window, through which one of the beautiful pendent nests of this bird could be viewed. Everyone assembled and was able to admire this wonderful structure as the bird returned a number of times, remaining in view for prolonged periods. Also of note here was a European Reed Warbler, which sang throughout our stay. It proved to be our only encounter with this species during the tour. Flushed with success, the last leg of the day's journey was soon made to Quintana de La Serena ensuring an early arrival, allowing time to relax before the evening meal.

#### Day Six April 30th

The main focus of the time spent in La Serena was to observe birds especially adapted to life on the plains. The weather was considerably more tolerable than initially forecast and so it was no surprise that an early start was scheduled. In order to maximise chances of bustard and sandgrouse observations, a packed lunch was arranged to increase time spent in the field. Our journey out to an old mine, La Mina Mira Flores, yielded the ever abundant Corn Bunting, several Red-legged Partridge, prominently perched by the roadside and the first Calandra and Crested Larks of the morning. The mine itself proved extremely productive, with the first birds sighted being the intriguing population of Red-billed Choughs, which nest here, quite uniquely, on sandstone ledges and not, as one would imagine, on rocky outcrops. Here too, was a stunning male Spanish Wheatear, which settled on the fence before relocating to the ruins of an old building. Careful observation of the fields left of the track, yielded at least five Stone Curlews, which, remarkably, managed to completely disappear on occasions in a haze of purple blossoms along a rocky ridge in the centre of the field. Patience revealed at least four Little Bustards in full display, giving their distinctive raspberry calls from the thistle clad pastures. One particularly obliging bird was observed for over fifteen minutes, whilst clouds of Bee-eaters could be admired raiding a local farmer's bee hive, all in the same binocular view! A short walk followed, during which a Peregrine was seen sweeping across the ruins and several Common Ravens gave fly-over views, whilst their smaller

cousins, the inquisitive Western Jackdaws, stared suspiciously as we passed. After a considerable length of time listening and scanning, distant Pin-tailed Sandgrouse calls could be heard above the breeze. Locating to a higher vantage point the group scoured the ridges for these much wanted birds. A few moments later, three Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew across the mine, close enough to obtain views of their distinctive patterning. Despite our best attempts, these birds could not be relocated following their disappearance behind a sizeable ridge. The effort was however rewarded with some exceptional close views of Eurasian Roller, European Bee-eater and at least two more Spanish Wheatears. Next on the agenda was Pena Alobosa, an area good for both species of sandgrouse. Several Montagu's Harriers were noted, as well as many Calandra Larks. Here we encountered a distant flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, which vanished tantalisingly behind a distant ridge. Lunch was taken in an idyllic location, with scrub laden hillsides and a slowly meandering river on one side and a sizeable reservoir on the other, which offered not only spectacular scenic views but also some superb birding. A delightfully elegant adult Black Stork was found immediately upon our arrival, flying low across the reservoir, before rising slowly until it soared above our vantage point upon the ridge. Just as the group settled to their comestibles, a 3<sup>rd</sup> calendar year Bonelli's Eagle drifted across the closest hillside. The good light and close proximity to the bird enabled careful study of the rich chestnut tone to the underparts, as opposed to the pallid feathering of the adults. At least four Common Sandpipers and a couple of Ringed Plovers were found feeding around the shore of the reservoir and a Short-toed Eagle flew close overhead. Some scratchy calls and sharp buzzes from the dense scrub drew our attention to a number of Sardinian and Subalpine Warblers. Here a female Sardinian was observed carrying food towards its nest. Some distinctive vocalisations overhead alerted us to a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos flying above the ridge, right over the assembled party before vanishing behind the closest hill. After a slightly tense few minutes, the distinctive clamouring could be heard once more and they soon reappeared, initially perching, but slightly concealed in the dense bushes on the nearby slope, but soon, excellent scope views were enjoyed by all, as these extraordinary birds performed wonderfully for the next ten minutes or so. With just a few flight views of this highly prized species during the tour so far this was a most welcome encounter. The afternoon was spent exploring the grassy pastures along the Carretera de las Golondrinas or "Swallow Road". A short drive led to some intensively grazed fields, with seemingly poor soil and exposed dry earth, interspersed with the occasional dock plant and small boulders. Initial assessment from the windows of the vehicle yielded nothing, but pulling on to the track close to the farm buildings there was a sudden flurry of activity. From the tiny drinking pool burst several Little Ringed Plovers and then a mass of tern-like silhouettes filled the sky. Collared Pratincoles in abundance! First five, then ten and eventually around forty of these birds erupted from the nearby field, turning and twisting low across the ground before settling again and scuttling along with an action reminiscent of miniature Coursers, a family to which the Gladiola are closely related. Closer inspection of this field revealed several Short-toed Larks, creeping along the edges of a dusty patch. Up to fifteen Little Ringed Plovers weaved between the unobtrusive Pratincoles and Calandra Larks and Little Bustards delivered a continuous serenade. With the permission of local landowners granted, we set about locating the Great Bustard flocks. Soon, several males were located in a nearby field, inviting detailed studies. Close inspection of some dry soil fields with sparse grasses and tussocks revealed more Stone Curlews and using the vehicles as hides these remarkable birds proved surprisingly approachable. Distant flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were logged, whilst a Calandra Lark performed some impressive mimicry of the previous species, which initially tuned heads!

Heading back along the same road, we stopped again to admire the three Great Bustards, now standing in the closest corner of the field. As we watched, several swifts swept low across, including a pair of Alpines amongst the loose flock. Their large size and highly distinctive colouration could be appreciated with the naked eye, as we were but a few metres away. Back on the main road, several distant "white foam baths" could be seen in the fields, as more and more displaying Great Bustards became visible. Just beyond a steep incline, a flock of nineteen Great Bustards, including five males in full display, was located. Carefully approaching the edge, scope views of these huge and impressive birds were enjoyed for the next three quarters of an hour. Studies so clear as to enable the observer to count the individual "whiskers" adorning the faces of the male birds, as they vied for the females' attentions. During this time several Little Bustards provided stiff competition for our attention, in particular a couple of conspicuous males, as well as flight views of three other individuals and occasional cameo appearances made by two females. On the distant hillside a large ploughed area looked promising as we scoured the land for sandgrouse. Eventually a flock of Pin-tailed and then also several Black bellieds were seen flying across the distant ridge before landing in this field. Bearing in mind that Britain probably possesses counties of smaller land area than this field, it was something of a challenge to relocate them in the shimmer. Although at times they appeared nothing more than moving patches of earth on a sandy background, we were able, with a degree of imagination, to see these birds feeding unobtrusively amidst the furrows, almost a

kilometre away. As the wind picked up and the clouds darkened in the late afternoon, the journey was made back to La Serena, knowing that sandgrouse would be a key focus of the proceedings the following day.

#### Day Seven May 1st

The last full day of birding started with a forty minute drive to Sierra de Tiros, a picturesque village situated directly below the site of a relatively well preserved Moorish castle. This area, with its large rock faces and panoramic views, was a wonderful location for a short walk. The stretch of rock face adjacent to the path produced one of the real speciality birds of the area, a fine male Black Wheatear, which performed wonderfully on several occasions before being joined by the female bird. As these delightful birds flitted from rock to rock, the inverted black "T" on the tail, consisting of a broad terminal band and black central rectrices could be clearly observed. This is a definitive field characteristic in separating this species from first year, or juvenile White-crowned Black Wheatear, although the nature of the species distribution in Spain was also a great help! Here too were several pairs of Blue Rock Thrush delivering their fluty songs from the scree slope. An allotment, to the left of the path, provided refuge for a migrant Willow Warbler as it flitted around in the weedy fringes, displaying its pale legs and prominent primary projection. Climbing the steps towards the castle, a pair of nesting Rock Buntings could be observed food passing close to their nest. The male, proclaiming territorial rights by singing from several conspicuous perches, seemed quite unconcerned by our presence. Atop the castle fortifications exceptional panoramic views could be enjoyed in the company of plentiful Alpine Swifts, which have a significant colony on the nearby rock face. Indeed, over forty birds were noted in the air together, their chattering calls so unlike those of Common and Pallid Swifts, as they streaked around at eye level and above our heads affording views down to a few metres. Somewhat less auspicious are the fortunes of Crag Martin at this site. Numbers have diminished hugely, with just a single bird noted here amongst the numerous and varied hirundines, from what was formerly a thriving colony. Several Black Vultures and Booted Eagles were noted from this vantage point and Nightingale song drifted up from the olive groves below. The sudden acceleration in wind speed and increasing cloud cover influenced a short visit into town to the local cafe for warm drinks before moving on. The female Black Wheatear was relocated amongst the buildings and a male Blue Rock Thrush was seen on the telephone wires. A visit was now made to a sheltered valley, flanked by high ridges on both sides, recording our first Eurasian Turtle Dove en route. This site quickly yielded another Bonelli's Eagle, this time an adult, which showed splendidly as it patrolled the ridge. Here we scanned the crevices with a view to locating an Eagle Owl nest. No tell-tale white marks lined the rocks but this site seemed perfect, although the sheltered side of the gorge was somewhat less accessible and thus was probably the area most likely for Eurasian Eagle Owls to nest. Several Woodchat Shrikes and Sardinian Warblers were observed, before a male Spanish Wheatear was spotted on a prominent shrub at the very top of the ridge. Several Mistle Thrushes were seen here before attentions turned to the swift and hirundine activity above the ridge. A fine selection of birds soared high above us, so scopes were the most practical method of accurate identification. Here, Common and Alpine Swifts were interspersed with Red-rumped Swallows, House Martins and Barn Swallows. Closer examination revealed several marginally smaller, more elongated swifts, with deeply forked tails and decidedly white tail bases. White-rumped Swift! A bird which was not known to breed in this area. It appears to be perhaps something of an under-recorded species, owing to the location of their preferred nest sites. It is still a very uncommon bird in Europe, though increasing. Having missed this species by such a narrow margin at Monfrague, it was a real delight to observe up to five of these birds as they hawked acrobatically amidst the swirls of other swifts and hirundines. Although many of the group had seen this species in excellent numbers in Sub-Saharan Africa it is always pleasant to encounter an interesting bird in such unexpected circumstances. Lunch was taken in the beautifully shaded grounds of a fine church just outside town. Here, hundreds of House and Spanish Sparrows resided in the trees and more Turtle Doves were recorded. A quick amble revealed several Montagu's Harriers in the surrounding fields. Everyone abandoned lunch as a shout of "Wryneck!" went up, (a birders' equivalent of "fire!") when one was disturbed from foraging on the earth. Sadly, it was obviously too disturbed by this sudden intrusion, as it flew strongly and was lost behind a stand of trees. Intensive searches of this area did however reveal three Hoopoes plus a Turtle Dove bathing in a small unlikely swampy patch. Here too was a Little Ringed Plover, which seemed equally out of place! A drive along a road parallel to an old railway line was phenomenally productive with a shrike, either Woodchat or Iberian, every thirty metres along this stretch. An astounding concentration, with at least fourteen Woodchats and six Iberian Greys noted: plentiful here too were Common Stonechats. A pair of Spanish Wheatears were also seen well in a roadside field. Clearly insect food must have been here in abundance, as Rollers, Red-legged Partridge splendid numbers of Bee-eaters, Zitting Cisticolas and at least six Hoopoes were noted at this "hotspot". By the mid afternoon it was time to turn our attentions back to sandgrouse and our route around Carretera de las

Golondrinas was retraced, with these birds in mind. Returning to the plains brought the predictable abundance of Montagu's Harriers and Calandra Larks. Parking at the same site we had successfully used to approach the Stone Curlews the previous day, a short walk was taken, scanning all the time for the unobtrusive shuffling of sandgrouse. Mercifully, despite the haze, the heads of at least two birds were sighted upon the ridge. Pin-tailed! They froze and crouched to avoid detection. Too late for the birds... Josele stole furtively around the back of the mound and began to creep towards them, shepherding them towards the assembled crowd. Suddenly the pair were joined by a previously unseen third and flew strongly towards the group making a spectacular fly-pass at perhaps less than fifty metres with all plumage features clearly discernible. Several Short-toed Larks were also seen creeping around in the weedy field as we scanned for the sandgrouse. A drive-by view of the Pratincole fields confirmed that several were still present, before a stop was made close to the main road, to enjoy the spectacle of several male Montagu's Harriers displaying. This area was alive with birds with Little Bustard, Short-toed Eagle, a pair of Rollers, Zitting Cisticolas, carrying food for their young and up to eight Montagu's Harriers visible at a single time. Lesser Kestrels had monopolised the nest boxes installed on the nearest pylons, which were designed specifically for the Rollers and we spent some time observing these opportunistic critters as they carried prey to the nest. Our final stop was a short distance along a side road, in an area we had searched for sandgrouse previously. An unscheduled stop was made however, when a stunning male Ocellated Lizard scurried across the road before resting on the verge. He then dashed across open ground and into his burrow, in a small bank by the roadside. There are regional variations in the colouration of this species, with those in the Trujillo area possessing far less of the golden spangling displayed by those of La Serena. Almost simultaneously a flock of eight Black-bellied Sandgrouse were sighted from the other side of the vehicle. Although they quickly vanished, they seemed to land relatively close by, so we immediately gave chase. Abandoning the vehicles we soon located a pair of battling male Spanish Wheatears, but alas, no sandgrouse. Josele assembled the group and then took off in the vehicle along another track, in order to try and locate them. A few moments later five Black-bellied Sandgrouse erupted from behind a distant ridge. Calling strongly they came closer and closer until eventually they offered views comparable to those of the Pin-tailed, seen earlier in the afternoon. As these birds were lost in the distance, a further party of three flew across to join them, their plumage sparkling in the last of the afternoon sun. A truly fitting conclusion to an excellent day; a day which had epitomised the nature of the entire tour, resulting in a richly deserved reward for patience and endeavour. In conclusion, a grand team effort!

It was a most satisfied group that returned to the hotel with plenty of time to pack and conclude our check list before dinner. The last evening meal of the tour was another highly enjoyable occasion with the rice pudding and crème caramel deserts outstripping the fruit and yoghurt by quite some distance.

#### Day 8 May 2nd

The breakfast next morning was taken early, owing to the unfortunate complication of varying flight times. A four hour drive was required to reach Madrid Airport from La Serena and a two hour check-in requirement meant that mid-day was the deadline for the first flight. Therefore the necessary farewells were made at the hotel that morning as the two vans hit the road once more. Jesus took one party on ahead, whilst Josele's vehicle took a more leisurely approach. With some flights departing in the early evening, a little birding in the Madrid area had been arranged. The long drive back to Madrid gave final opportunities to see a number of special birds including our last Calandra Larks, Azure-winged Magpies, Great Spotted Cuckoos, Rollers, Hoopoes, Bee-eaters, Montagu's Harriers, Gull-billed Tern, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Black-winged Stilt and most significantly Black-shouldered Kite, hunting right by the main highway, some 80km south of Madrid. A short refreshment stop was greatly appreciated before the final hour of the journey was completed. A Terminal Four arrival at 11:50 marked a perfect drive time, with some great birding along the way. Here Jesus swiftly removed necessary luggage from the vehicle as we said our farewells.

A wonderfully pleasant, enthusiastic, patient and knowledgeable group combined with the wealth of knowledge, experience and logistical skills of Josele and Jesus ensured an extremely successful tour in which it was an honour to participate. Many thanks to all concerned for making the tour such a success I thoroughly enjoyed your company throughout.

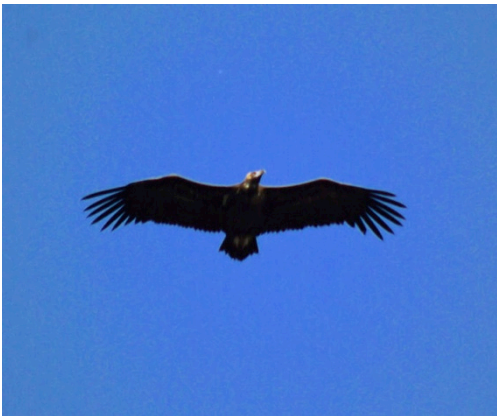
Harry Barnard

## Birds of The Trip

Iga: Montagu's Harrier  
Jeremy: Spanish imperial Eagle  
Sylvia: Black-shouldered kite  
Mick: Spanish Imperial Eagle  
Margaret: Black-Shouldered Kite  
John: Black Stork  
Betty: Montagu's Harrier/ Bee-eater  
John: Montagu's Harrier

Hazel: Black-Shouldered Kite  
Sue: Azure-winged Magpie  
Nigel: Spanish Imperial Eagle  
Herman: Great Bustard  
Josele: Penduline Tit at the nest  
Jesus: Penduline Tit at the nest  
Harry: White-rumped Swift





**Pictures by John Goodspeed**

