

Extremadura and Gredos Mountains 2007 (Naturetrek)

Day 1

Saturday 12 May

After a slight delay on the flight arrival time we quickly had the vehicles sorted and loaded and headed out onto the motorways from Madrid's Barajas airport on route to our first destination of the Extremadura! During our initial rather rapid journey we picked up our first birds as a sampler of what was to come in the form of Cattle Egrets, Black Kites, White Storks and Spotless Starlings.

In order to allow everyone a chance to gather their breath and stretch their legs we pulled off the motorway towards Saucedilla and visited the Parque Ornitológico de Arrocampo which now seems to be an offshoot of the Parque Nacional de Monfrague with several hides and trails. Time, unfortunately, did not permit a full exploration of the site but we still had some fabulous birds from a short walk alongside the lake and reed beds by the road. These included several views of Little Bittern in flight, prominent singing Great Reed Warbler, singing Savi's Warbler, Purple Heron and a rather unexpected Spoonbill. The main reason for stopping was to try and see the Purple Gallinules resident here in which we were successful, having several sightings of up to three individuals in flight and clambering over the reeds.

We then completed our journey to the Finca Santa Marta where we were met by the staff and owner Henri, who gave us an introductory talk on the history of the farm and buildings while we feasted on drinks and nibbles.

Day 2

Sunday 13 May

We started the day early with a pre-breakfast drive to the Belen plains a 15 minute drive from the Finca. Calandra and Crested Larks were immediately obvious alongside the ubiquitous Corn Buntings. Black Kites were also notable early risers! At our first stop and scan we were fortunate to have a fabulous flypast (and behind over the road) of our first Great Bustard showing plumage detail beautifully in the early morning light. We also found another bird on the ground which performed a somewhat half-hearted display. We were also hearing the characteristic display call of Little Bustard and eventually picked up a couple of birds on the ground followed by a group of 3 in flight showing the striking white panels in the wings. A Little Owl was also seen perched on the wall of a ruined farm as well as several Hoopoes.

After a hearty breakfast we headed out to cruise the quieter backroads of the northern Cáceres/Trujillo plains. Our first of several Black Vultures were soon picked up as well as Woodchat Shrike and Spanish Sparrow at our first stop. Unfortunately, despite appeals, we cannot include the peacock heron calling on the trip list as it was of probable escaped/domestic origins! Moving on we had several excellent sightings of both male and female Montagu's Harriers, one of which perched conveniently 30 metres away on a fence post. At another stop a little later some of the group managed to get onto a small party of 3 Black-bellied Sandgrouse as they flew by distantly. By now we had also picked up our first Booted and Short-toed eagles and Griffon Vultures.

We then stopped for lunch by the Rio Almonte at what seemed an idyllic spot by a ruined water-mill. Unfortunately I then proceeded to get the minibus stuck in the loose river shale near the waters edge! Thus I probably provided everyone with their photographic highlight of the tour of me and several other male members of the trip peering under a stationary vehicle and scratching our heads in puzzlement. Luckily just when things looked bleak some uniformed forestry workers arrived in their 4x4 and towed the vehicle out so saving us from losing any meaningful time from the day. Luckily the birds were good here, the highlight being Black Wheatear, Egyptian Vulture and Blue Rock Thrush.

We then moved on for an afternoon walk near Monroy. Here we had some excellent close views of Booted Eagle and another male Montagu's Harrier. After much debate and examination we were also confident of having seen our first Thekla Larks in the ploughed orchard fields. The White Storks nesting here had a very noisy colony of Spanish Sparrows squatting in the nest bases which were noticeable in their constant comings and goings. It was here on the other side of the road that we found a stunning colony of the Tongue Orchid *Serapias lingua* showing a broad range of flower variation.

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Day 3

Monday 14 May

A few members of the trip went out on another pre-breakfast drive to re-visit the Caceres/Trujillo plains. After breakfast we all then visited the Monfrague National Park. En route we saw our first Spanish Imperial Eagles. We pulled over and were presented with a pair soaring increasingly higher over us and then drifting away. On our arrival at the park we first stopped at the famous Griffon Vulture colony at Pena Halcon. Here we were thrilled by the ariel display put on by these huge scavengers. We also saw Peregrine and Black Vulture soaring over the cliffs. Once our attention shifted from the cliffs we picked up Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Subalpine Warblers among the rocks and scrub around us.

We then drove slowly through the park towards the far end and the cliffs at Mirador Portilla del Teitar. Before arriving there we stopped at the bridge to watch the Alpine Swifts swooping under it among the numerous house martins. We also luckily spotted 2 Rock Sparrows perched on the railings. Once at the cliffs we were fortunate in being just able to pick out a young Eagle Owl chick on the cliff face looking for all the world like some kind of cuddly toy! While here we had another pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, all three species of vulture and a Black Stork.

It was now felt time for lunch during which the vultures soaring overhead seemed to be getting closer and closer accompanied by a Black Stork. Luckily we all felt healthy and not likely to provide an unplanned avian lunch! The Black Stork seen earlier also came down and landed on a rock and posed beautifully for photos near the dam crossing.

By now there was a palpable pent up desire for a walk among the group which we were able to satisfy with a delightful walk through the evergreen oak and shrub forest alongside a stream and on up to a watch point on a hilltop behind the cliff face at Pena halcon. During this walk we saw our first Sardinian Wablers, numerous butterflies and really got a feel for the contrast between the hot south-facing slopes with typical Mediterranean flora of cistus and lavender and the cooler north-facing shady evergreen forest. Once on the hilltop some of the group witnessed a spectacular stoop by a young Spanish Imperial Eagle at a Black Vulture. The eagle was joined by another young bird which both then landed in a distant pine which we were able to view through various telescopes.

Day 4

Tuesday 15 May

Different pre-breakfast drives were taken. One group returning to the Caceres/Trujillo plains where they saw several Great Spotted Cuckoos and a group of grounded vultures including 3 black. The other party provided those members who had not been out early previously with a last chance to see the two bustard species before we moved on, in which we were successful.

We then returned to the Monfrague National Park where one group had a second look at the Eagle Owl chick which this time was showing a lot better. We had an earlier lunch today to enable one group to have another different walk through the park woodlands. This walk was mainly of botanical interest during which we saw Dense-flowered Orchid *Neotinea maculata*, Palmate Anemone *Anemone palmata*, and several typical trees and shrubs of the area. The other group went north of the park to two different sites in the hope of finding Black-shouldered Kite in which they unfortunately failed (maybe next year!).

Both groups were then re-united on the top of Monfrague castle. Some of the walking group had the briefest of glimpses of White-rumped Swift below the castle and it was hoped that looking down from above we should all get good views from the castle tower. Again we were disappointed and only a couple of the group managed to latch on to the birds which proved to be very elusive.

Day 5

Wednesday 16 May

A special diehard only pre-pre-breakfast birding trip was organised so that those interested could pick up Roller for the trip which in view of the early departure was fortunately successful!

We then left the plains behind us to head for the contrasting mountain location of the Sierra Gredos. We had a stop en route at the top of the pass at Puerto del Pico. Here some of us relaxed with a much needed coffee while some, who just couldn't help themselves, continued birding! Our

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first Ibex were spotted on the rocky slopes above us relaxing on boulders and grazing the vegetation.

We travelled on through the mountains for a picnic lunch at a wonderful Scots pine and downy oak wood near Hoyocasero (which was to be christened Bonelli's wood for obvious reasons). Here what was to have been a primarily floral treat also proved to produce some fantastic birds as well! The main contenders for our attention were the numerous Bonelli's Warblers singing prominently throughout. These were also joined (to the delight of one group member) by our first Bonelli's Eagle gliding over the wood. We also enjoyed both dark and light phase Booted Eagles, Short-toed Eagle, Black and Red Kites, Melodious Warbler, Nuthatch and heard the Iberian race Green Woodpecker. The floral delights consisted of slopes covered in the yellow form of Alpine Pasque flower *Pulsatilla alpina* ssp. *apiifolia*, two species of Wild Peony, *Paeonia officinalis* and *Paeonia broteri*, and the beautiful dainty Angel's Tears *Narcissus triandrus*.

Day 6

Thursday 17 May

We started the day with a short walk through the pine woods below the Parador in which we saw a couple of Red Squirrel, numerous Crested and Coal Tits and watched a pair of Short-toed Tree-creeper at their nest site behind a flap of peeling bark.

We then took a slow drive up the road towards the plataforma car park during which we stopped on several occasions and finally had lunch. We got off to a fabulous start on the road with a group of 3 Honey Buzzards soaring very low over us showing their diagnostic field characters very clearly and also a distant Goshawk doing display stoops before swooping into the pine forest. Unexpectedly Ortolan Buntings proved commoner than rock buntings on the drive. At our lunch stop we picked up a couple of Citril Finches around a small pine plantation in the 'hedgehog' scrub flying over on a couple of occasions, making up for having failed to find them earlier at the Parador wood!

On arrival at the plataforma car park after lunch we took a preliminary group walk up to a point at which all members felt comfortable before returning. We saw our first Water Pipits at the car park by the stream very well. During the walk we came upon several groups of the tiny *Narcissus bulbocodium* and *Narcissus rupicola*. About a further half hours climb after the concrete bridge, around which we saw the very handsome Iberian Blue-headed type Yellow Wagtail, we found our first Bluethroats. Interestingly all the birds seen lacked the white throat spot having all blue throats. Very nice! As mentioned earlier on the trip a 'good bird'. During the walk we had seen several large groups of Ibex, most having been youngsters, but at one point we had a large bachelor herd of large males with impressive sets of horns. On our return our first Dipper was spotted on the cascades of the stream running down to the car park.

Day 7

Friday 18 May

A pre-breakfast group went to 'Bonelli's' wood during which they added Hobby, Pied Flycatcher and managed a brief view of Iberian Green Woodpecker as well as Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Today we again split into two groups to reflect differing interests and fitness. The larger group proceeded to the plataforma car park to make the ascent to the Laguna Grande which nestles below the amphitheatre of the highest peaks of the Sierra Gredos which rise to a height of nearly 2600m the third highest range in Spain. After a very hot start to the walk we reached a higher level and a cooling breeze. Griffon Vultures were constantly present and we also saw at least one Black Vulture and single Egyptian Vulture. With the higher we got hopes were raised of seeing Alpine Accentor but every bird present stubbornly remained Dunnock. Perhaps global warming spells the demise of accentors in this range as Dunnocks push ever higher? After a 3 hour walk we reached the lake and a well earned lunch in spectacular surroundings. Strangely the lake edge seemed full of disembodied toad body parts although a few live individuals were seen. A light cloud cover had by now built up to take the edge of the hot sun and make our walking more comfortable. At a couple of drinking springs on the way up large male Ibex had taken up territory which posed for photos at a distance of less than 5 metres, presumably having become aware of walkers stopping for food and rest and providing easy scraps to scavenge. The walk back proved pleasant and uneventful except for our fortunate escape from the most torrential hail and rain storm which struck when we

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were less than 5 mins. from the minibus. Lucky us!! I for one would not have fancied being out on the mountain when the heavens opened in such a dramatic way.

The other group had opted for a more leisurely walk along the Rio Tormes during which they saw several dipper and more lowland forest birds. They then went on to 'Bonelli's' wood in the afternoon for a repeat dose of what this lovely wood had to offer.

All excitement seemed over now until the evening roll-call when due to the wonders of digital photography we were able to add Tree Sparrow to the group tally from a shot taken by one member.

Day 8 Saturday 19 May

An early start to catch our return flight to the UK prevented any further birding beyond viewing from the bus windows!

Supplied by David Anderton