

Spain - Extremadura & Gredos Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

2010

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Madrid and transfer to Trujillo

Day 2/4 Monfrague/Trujillo

Day 5/7 Gredos Mountains

Day 8 Fly Madrid to London



Gredos Mountains

Thomas Mills

Dates

Wednesday 5th May – Wednesday 12th May

Cost

£1,195 (London/London); £1,075 (Madrid/Madrid)

Single room supplement

£195

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy/moderate day walks, though there will be some tougher options in the Gredos for those requiring them!

Focus

Primarily birds but also plants, butterflies and mammals



Lesser Kestrel

Peter Dunn



Peter Dunn



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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is an 8-day holiday in search of the birds and other natural history in the steppes and plains of Extremadura and the mountain habitats in the Sierra de Gredos. It offers a combination of some of Spain's finest and most contrasting habitats – the undulating, sun-drenched steppes and shimmering plains of Extremadura, the rugged oak-forested hills of Monfragüe National Park, and the imposing granite peaks of the Sierra de Gredos. We will explore these exciting and wild habitats during the course of this two-centre, week-long holiday, focusing particularly on the birdlife of the region, but also enjoying the abundant and colourful wayside flora of both the plains and mountains, as well as any butterflies and mammals we encounter during the week.

Day 1

Wednesday

Trujillo (Steppes)

We depart London Heathrow this morning on our scheduled flight to Madrid. On arrival we will drive south-west for about three hours to Trujillo, passing first through rolling hills before the vista gradually opens out to one of rolling steppe and farmland, broken by areas of Olive groves and the Cork Oak woodland and extensive sheep-grazed grasslands known locally as *debasas*, a landscape so typical of the Extremadura region. Southern Grey Shrikes are a common sight perched on roadside wires and in the adjacent woodlands Azure-winged Magpies noisily feed whilst numerous raptors hunt overhead.

On arrival in Trujillo, a small town at the very heart of Spain's central plains, we will check into a delightful hotel, a converted olive mill, our base for the next four nights. This ancient town, with a beautiful old medieval centre, retains much of its sixteenth century architecture within the original city walls including spectacular mansions built by the Pizarro brothers, leaders of the Spanish expedition to the Inca empire in South America. The town's most famous sons amassed a considerable fortune from their expeditions and many of the older buildings in this attractive town display the grandeur and opulence of the conquistador period. Trujillo is also an ideal spot from which to explore the adjacent steppes and the magnificent Monfragüe National Park, and it even supports a rich birdlife of its own, including flocks of Lesser Kestrels and the Pallid Swifts that wheel around Trujillo's beautifully preserved ancient churches, whilst White Storks peer down from their roof-top nests or clatter their bills to greet a returning mate.

The Spanish steppes are amongst the richest and least disturbed grassland habitats in Europe and they hold one of the world's largest populations of Great and Little Bustards, Black Vulture, Red Kite and Lesser Kestrel – all birds that are threatened throughout their entire global ranges.

Unfortunately, in common with many of the world's most valuable wildlife areas, the Spanish Steppes are under threat. Rapid agricultural change is sweeping through Spain, mostly prompted by government intervention, and the intensification of traditional farming practices, including the irrigation of land that is converting much of the dry steppe to a monoculture farmland. Over 3 million hectares of steppe have already been lost through irrigation and

the Spanish Government plan to irrigate a further 4 million hectares by the year 2010. With this in mind, Birdlife International have been working in conjunction with their Spanish partners to campaign against the continued irrigation of steppeland and for a programme of 'Zoning' whereby farmers are subsidised for environmentally sound practices. It is under this scheme that the unique environment that we focus on in Extremadura hopefully has a future.

After settling into our comfortable hotel, we should have time before dinner to venture out into the steppes to whet our appetites for tomorrow's activities.

Day 2

Thursday

Trujillo (Steppes)

After an early breakfast we will leave the hotel and drive north to the gently undulating plains that surround Trujillo in search of the displaying Great and Little Bustards that are present here in good numbers. Rough tracks criss-cross the steppes and by driving slowly along these we should have little difficulty in locating the displaying groups of these two species which are certainly the star attractions of this region. The sight of a male Great Bustard in full display has to be one of the most spectacular avian sights Europe has to offer... one moment a turkey-sized bird then, after an outstanding piece of contortion, a ball of white feathers on legs – the "foam bath" display! There will also be ample opportunities to watch some of the raptors (of which there are sixteen species in the area, including the localised Black-shouldered Kite) and other species that make this area such an exiting destination, such as Montagu's Harrier, Short-toed Eagle, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Spanish Sparrow, Rock Sparrow, Quail, Stone Curlew, both Black and Black-eared Wheatear and, with luck and careful searching, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Bee-eaters and Rollers bring colour to the scene whilst, in the surrounding Cork Oak *dehasa*, we will look for Great Spotted Cuckoos, Hoopoes, Orphean Warblers, Short-toed Treecreepers, both Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes and Azure-winged Magpies.

At some stage we will set aside a couple of hours to wander around the maze of narrow streets in the medieval quarter of town and watch both the Lesser Kestrels and White Storks which breed on the rooftops. The statues of the Pizarro brothers – the Inca Conquerors – are in the central plaza and the town has a wonderful historic feeling about it.

During the mid afternoon we will continue our exploration of the local steppes in search of more bustards and other specialities of the region. Black Vultures are often seen soaring around the nearby hills and Spanish Imperial Eagles are occasionally seen drifting past. We aim to be back at our hotel around early evening and in plenty of time for dinner.

Day 3

Friday

Trujillo (Monfragüe)

After breakfast we will drive the short distance to Monfragüe National Park, roughly 50 kilometres to the north of Trujillo. Monfragüe is not only an incredibly beautiful area but also a wonderful place in which to go birdwatching, being especially good for birds of prey. Our first stop will be at the sheer rock face of Penafalcón, home to numerous pairs of Griffon Vultures. The small car park opposite affords wonderful views of these impressive birds on their nests along with dozens of others soaring on the thermals above. Black Vultures frequently join these

patrolling flocks and it is not uncommon to see the occasional Chough, Peregrine or Egyptian Vulture drift overhead. With luck we should be able to find one or two of the Black Storks which use this area to breed, indeed one very obliging pair has built a nest close to the base of the rockface and, assuming they return to breed, we should have excellent views of this rare bird on its nest. Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting all inhabit the rocky slopes around the base of Penafalcón and in the cork oak woodlands Short-toed Treecreeper, Hawfinch, Cirl Bunting and Golden Oriole all breed.

After lunch we will continue our exploration of Monfragüe by driving to the many vantage points scattered around the park. Here we will watch for the huge numbers of birds of prey that inhabit the area. In addition to the species already mentioned, there is a good chance of finding Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Golden Eagle, Red and Black Kites, Hobby and, with luck, maybe a roosting Eagle Owl or one of Monfragüe's most sought after and well known inhabitants, the Spanish Imperial Eagle. Indeed, we should be able to see an Imperial Eagle's nest which, although very distant, has been used for at least the past six years. We will also take a series of short walks off into the scrub and woodland in search of warblers, such as Subalpine, Dartford and Orphean, and spend time at the main bridge over the reservoir watching the flocks of screaming Alpine Swifts. Amongst other abundant occupants of the hills are Thekla Lark, Crag Martin and Red-rumped Swallow.

Late in the afternoon we will take a walk to the top of the castle for an eye to eye view of soaring vultures and storks. From this high vantage point you can see over the whole park and are often treated to incredibly close views of a variety of raptor species as they slowly drift past on the wind, a truly breathtaking sight. Early in the evening we will head back to our hotel, arriving in time to enjoy our evening meal and complete the daily checklist.

Day 4

Saturday

Trujillo

Today we will take our final full day's excursion from Trujillo. Where we chose to spend this final day in Extremadura will depend on the weather and on what species we most want to focus on, given our success over previous days.

Early in the evening we will head back to Trujillo arriving in the hotel in time for dinner.

Days 5 – 7

Sunday – Tuesday

The Gredos Mountains

To the north-east of Extremadura and Monfragüe lies the Sierra de Gredos. We will drive there this morning, basing ourselves for the second part of this week-long holiday in a rather comfortable boutique-style hotel that boasts a fine view towards the mountains and serves some of the finest food in the province in its award-winning restaurant. This will ensure that we are in good shape for our walks in the surrounding hills, forests and mountains! There is also a small spa next to the hotel which may interest you if you want some time off from the wildlife exploration. We are told that prices compare very favourably against spa prices in the UK!

The Gredos is a rugged and imposing range of granite mountains that rises to 2,600 metres and is a stronghold of the magnificent Spanish Ibex, a species that we will make a special effort to see during our stay. In the valley below our hotel we will search the pine forests for Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Firecrest, Pied

Flycatcher, Crested Tit, and perhaps even Citril Finch and Crossbill. Higher up, above the tree-line, we will search for breeding Crag Martins, Dippers, Bluethroats, Rock and Ortolan Buntings, whilst higher still we will look for Water Pipits, Alpine Accentors, Black Redstarts and Rock Thrushes. Birds of prey are not numerous here, but amongst the species that do pass overhead from time to time are both Black and Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagle and Booted Eagle. The dominant plant of the mountains is the yellow-flowered broom, but along the rivers, streams, roads and tracks of the Gredos – and in the ancient stone-walled hay meadows and grazing pastures – we will find a colourful flora that includes many orchid species. Indeed, by spending most of our time on this part of the holiday exploring on foot, by means of mountain walks, we can hope to see a wide range of wildlife including an excellent flora and attendant butterfly- and insect-life.

During our two full days here, we will take a delicious picnic lunch with us each day and spend all day on foot in the mountains, exploring them at gentle pace.

Day 8

Wednesday

London

Returning to Madrid this morning we board our return flight to London Heathrow.

Grading

Grade A/B. During our stay in Extremadura, we will be following the format of a traditional birding tour, with no strenuous walking involved, although we will be making a few early starts! During the latter part of the holiday, in the Gredos Mountains, we will be spending more time birding and botanising on foot, taking a number of easy/moderate day, or half day, walks. There will also be some tougher options in the Gredos for those requiring them!

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday, and we will be staying in excellent family-run establishments near Trujillo and in the Gredos, all rooms in both hotels having private facilities. As an additional bonus, our Gredos hotel is blessed with an award-winning restaurant which we are sure to enjoy!

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this tour, you will need to read the Naturetrek booking conditions carefully and then complete and return a booking form, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. Should you have any questions about the tour, please call us on 01962 733051 or emailinfo@naturetrek.co.uk.