

Spain - Extremadura in Winter

A private trip for the members of RSPB Guildford local group

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 October - 3 November 2018

Report compiled by Simon Tonkin



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Summary

Extremadura is one of the gems in Spain's birding crown, and this early winter visit certainly showed the group its majesty! Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse graced the plains with a constant backdrop of song provided by Calandra, Crested, Thekla's, Lesser Short-toed Larks, and Skylarks. Spanish Imperial and Golden Eagles, Griffon and Cinereous Vultures vied for attention in the mountains of Monfragüe, alongside Blue Rock Thrush, Dartford Warbler and Rock Bunting. The ricefields and reservoirs immersed the group in the spectacle of thousands of wintering Common Cranes and wildfowl, and an impressive Spotless Starling roost provided an uplifting end to an exploration of medieval Trujillo. And all this topped off with delicious picnics and evening meals featuring the very best local produce Extremadura has to offer!

Day 1

Saturday 27th October

Simon met the group at Madrid airport and we were soon loaded into our spacious minibus and on our way to the hotel. The journey was a couple of hours, and we took it at a leisurely pace, stopping along the A5 for refreshments and to get our first glimpses of both Common Cranes and Red Kites.

We soon arrived at the lovely Viña las Torres, a grand country house situated right out in the rolling farmland near Trujillo, where our host Belén and her family would be looking after us for the next few days.

We had plenty of time to settle in to our spacious rooms before our first three-course meal of local delicacies, many of the ingredients of which come from Belén's own garden.

Day 2

Sunday 28th October

A beautiful sunny morning saw us head out onto the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca. Here we were immediately in the thick of the action as Iberian Magpies, Spanish Sparrows, Thekla's, Crested, Calandra and Skylarks vied for attention and identification scrutiny. As we got to grips with the numerous larks we also enjoyed a mass of Northern Lapwings and Corn Buntings spread thickly across the plain.

As we moved on, we scanned patiently waiting for the first glimpse of the largest plain-dweller – and largest flying bird – the Great Bustard. Soon we had fabulous views of 27 of these spectacular birds in two separate groups. This fabulous resident of the steppe had decided we were worthy to gaze upon them and so we did! Iberian Grey Shrikes were spotted and we discussed at length the taxonomic status of this bird, now elevated to species status, and its interesting evolutionary connections with North Africa.

As we walked along the trail a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse went over, giving their 'shivering' call. We spotted an initial group of eight, then more flew along the same path and conveniently stopped in a field to show their black bellies and orange faces! As if that wasn't enough as we reached the ridge we heard the 'yar' call of the Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and we locked on to a small group whizzing across the plains. We also found a single adult Spanish Imperial Eagle, and several Cinereous and Griffon Vultures.

We then decided celebratory drinks were in order so we took coffees and hot chocolate in Santa Marta village, where we relaxed and regained our composure after ornithological sensory overload!

We merrily trundled down to the Rio Tamuja where we took our picnic lunch of local bread, gazpacho, hams, three kinds of local and extensively produced cheeses (one from a cow, one from a sheep and one from a goat!), locally grown olives and beans, traditional sustainable salt from Cadíz Bay, wine and even cake!

Moving on in something of a food coma we headed back to the steppe. Here we found not one but six Eurasian Hoopoes, loads of Calandra Larks, along with the steady backdrop of Crested Larks and Corn Buntings and numerous sightings of Iberian Grey Shrike. A ring-tailed Hen Harrier shot past and we also found two Little Owls, one of which pretended to be part of a wall and the other a rock!

We also observed several groups of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in flight but despite tracking them to their alighting point they vanished in the sea of grasses.

A real tip-top steppe day came to an end and we made the short drive back to Viña de las Torres and relaxed in front of the open fire before dinner.

Day 3

Monday 29th October

After breakfast, we made the journey to the famous Monfragüe National Park, one of the area's best-known birding hotspots. Our first stop was at Peña Falcon, a huge limestone monolith which is home to a large colony of vultures. Many Griffon Vultures soared around us, and soon we are focusing our attentions on a Cinereous Vulture - Europe's biggest raptor, and an absolute stunner!

A Rock Bunting called and flew over our heads and a Blue Rock Thrush perched obligingly. We also were lucky enough to find an unseasonal adult Egyptian Vulture which should have been on its way to Africa's Sahel region!

We also found two Mediterranean Peregrine Falcons and discussed how this race of '*brookiei*' differed from the northern European races.

To celebrate our raptor-infused morning we headed for a refreshment stop and a relax in the sun in a nearby village. Here, Black Redstarts sang, Cinereous Vultures drifted overhead and groups of Crested Larks, Common Linnets and House Sparrows flitted among the vegetation.

Driving through the Mediterranean scrub-covered hills above Villareal, we stopped, looked and listened amongst the *Cistus* bushes. We were able to first hear and then see Dartford Warblers, and Tony briefly locked onto a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

Soon it was lunchtime and we took our fine picnic lunch whilst Red Deer lurked in among the bushes.

Driving the short distance to Portilla del Tietar, we were among the Crag Martins, and also a gathering of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures lingering over the hillside, seemingly coming in to a carcass. An immature Golden Eagle drifted overhead giving great views. Our patience here was to be rewarded as we waited patiently

for a true royal visit! And there it was literally right in front of us and very low as if we were being knighted - a glorious Spanish Imperial Eagle!

Day 4

Tuesday 30th October

Unfortunately, our day began rather wet. With rain set in, we headed out with the idea to beat the weather with positivity! As we drove through the village of Zorita we were surprised to discover three Red-rumped Swallows that were drying off on telegraph wires in a brief lull in the rain.

Moving on to the Embalse de Alcollarín we stopped to view at the dam and were rewarded with sightings of Great Egret, Common Kingfisher, Black-necked Grebe and Egyptian Geese.

As we scanned out further, we found Eurasian Wigeon, Common Coot, Gadwall, Little and Great-crested Grebes and a few Northern Pintail. We also found up to five Eurasian Hoopoes - four of which were hanging out together - and two Tufted Ducks, another Common Kingfisher and a Rock Petronia.

As the rain got worse, we decided to return to Viña las Torres, where we took our picnic under cover. As we relaxed, the weather broke, allowing for time to be spent doing a little birding in the house's extensive grounds. A Short-toed Treecreeper hung underneath a roof allowing us good views. Also here were numerous Blackcaps, Common Chiffchaffs and Iberian Magpies.

After resting for a while we headed for a late afternoon visit to the picturesque medieval town of Trujillo. Our first stop was a little-known pond among the back streets. This pool of dreams certainly provided great views of several species including Grey and White Wagtails, Common Snipes, Black-winged Stilts and Little Ringed Plovers.

In the town itself we enjoyed exploring the birth place of the great Conquistadors, but also the huge gathering of Spotless Starlings that come in from feeding in the surrounding countryside to roost amongst the warmer city buildings. This was a real delight and also gave us chance to see Crag Martins roosting communally among the artificial crags formed by the city's ancient buildings.

Day 5

Wednesday 31st October

Today the weather had improved considerably and we made the long journey to ...the garden! Here Tony had had a strange sighting so we went to check it out. Within seconds of arrival the mystery was unravelled as a Yellow-browed Warbler called among the pines and wild olives! What a great find and only metres from the breakfast table!

We loaded up the minibus a little later than usual due to the delay caused by the Siberian interloper and we headed for the plains of Campo Lugar. Here as we drove through the steppe we stopped to observe Griffon Vultures resting on a roadside stone, and a large group of Egyptian Geese drifted over.

Entering a quieter back road area, we found a large group of Great Bustards really close to the road. We carefully got out of the bus without disturbing them and got incredible views! In total we counted 21 individuals. The air

was filled with bird song, Calandra Larks buzzing and fizzing dominating proceedings but Crested Larks and Skylarks, Corn Buntings and Meadow Pipits also filled the landscape and airwaves.

From here we headed to the area of Moheda Alta and had lunch among the bright yellow flowering Bullate or Autumn Buttercups. We took our leisurely lunch among the trees as squadrons of delightfully noisy Common Cranes passed over. We also took advantage of the hides here and sought out more views of the thousands of Common Cranes that winter here. Common Snipe and Green Sandpiper were found as well as a stunning Iberian Grey Shrike.

We leisurely travelled back through the rice fields near Madrigalejo, which were laden with Common Cranes - what a sight this was! We also happened upon our first Red Avadavat flying straight towards us.

Dusk fell as Common Cranes bugled and we made our way back to an open fire and yet more of Belén's excellently-prepared food.

Day 6

Thursday 1st November

Today brought an atmospheric, foggy morning, so we dropped our elevation and explored the Fernando V rice fields. Here we were again amongst the spectacular gathering of wintering Common Cranes and White Storks. As we stopped alongside a nice area of successional scrub, we found mixed flocks of Tree, Spanish and House Sparrows. A stunning male Red Avadavat showed off in front of us, constantly calling and eventually drawing the attention of a female.

By the time we had finished another fine picnic lunch, the fog had cleared, so we headed for the plains of Campo Lugar, where we yet again found large groups of Great Bustards! We picked up seven Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight and eventually we found our first Little Bustards - two in flight that unfortunately decided to drop out of view. We also had a fabulous Golden Eagle drift overhead, giving splendid views and stooping just over the minibus!

Everywhere we looked we found Calandra, Crested or Skylarks. The soundscape and scenery were amazing and we just stopped and listened as we took in all the vast plains had to give us, before making our way back to our accommodation for yet another beautiful meal.

Day 7

Friday 2nd November

Today we set out to explore one final section of plains – around the village of Belén and the Monroy road – as well as spending a little more time on the glorious steppes of Santa Marta de Magasca. Griffon and Cinereous Vultures circled overhead and we also saw many Western Marsh Harriers, Red Kites and Common Buzzards as well as six Little Owls and a Golden Eagle. Again we lucked out and found a further nine Great Bustards and four Black-bellied Sandgrouse! Out on Belén plain we were thrilled to be able to add Eurasian Stone Curlew to our list, as well as European Golden Plover. Eurasian Hoopoes were super-numerous all day and we probably saw around 25 altogether. The usual lark soundscape soothed our ears once more, but perhaps the star of Belén was a wintering Wryneck, sat up on a post for all to see!

After lunch we headed to the beautiful oak woodlands above Garciaz. We parked up and took a stroll down the road, where we could immediately pick out singing Woodlarks. A little searching and we were able to see four of them. We were thrilled to find a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, as well as Great Spotted. Hawfinch graced our visit, as did plenty of Eurasian Jays, Eurasian Nuthatches and Short-toed Treecreepers.

We rounded off the day with a warming coffee in the village of Madroñera before heading home with plenty of time to relax and pack before our final delicious evening meal from the kitchen garden of Belén!

Day 8

Saturday 3rd November

Today we headed for Saucedilla and the Arrocampo Reservoir. Here we were fortunate enough to find several species that we had already encountered but also obtained close views of species like Iberian Grey Shrike. However, the starlets here were two Penduline Tits which gave away their presence by their call. We were soon able to locate them and obtain fabulous scope views.

All too soon however our adventure was at an end, and we headed back towards the airport. Simon provided a “light” picnic lunch *en route* to keep everyone going, and delivered everyone in good time to catch flights home.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November						
			27	28	29	30	31	1	2
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				14+	50+		
2	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>				4	50+		
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				✓			
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				50+			
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				20+			
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		12		✓			4
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				5			
8	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		1		30+			
9	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1					
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				2			
11	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			20+				
12	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2		✓			
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓			
14	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>				6			
15	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20+				c.10	15+	2
16	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>					40+	✓	
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			c.15	10+	3	10+	
18	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				5	1		
19	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			2	3		3	
20	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2		200+	✓		20+	
21	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			1				
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	5+	30+	60+		70+	5+	20+
23	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>	1	3+	10+		3		2
24	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1	1				
25	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1		1	1	
26	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>						1	
27	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				1	5+	10+	2
28	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1		1		1	
29	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10+	c.15	4	7	20+	50+	30+
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	4		2	5	20+	10+
31	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		27			21	4	9
32	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						2	
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				c.5		1	
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓			
35	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	10+	3	2		2,000+	500+	
36	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>							1
37	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				6+			
38	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	4+	15+	50+	✓	✓
39	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					5		2
40	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				c.10			
41	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				8	1	3	
42	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						1	
43	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1		5	4		1
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				1			
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		3	5	✓	✓	✓	3
46	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			1				
47	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				1	✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November						
			27	28	29	30	31	1	2
48	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				1			
49	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		c.15					
50	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		11				7	4
51	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	10+	20+	1		10+	2
53	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		3				2	6
55	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			2	3		1	1
56	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		6		4	2	15+	25
57	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>			1				1
58	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>						1	1
59	Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>							1
60	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3	4	4		3	10+	4
61	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1		
62	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2		1		
63	Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	4+						
64	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		5+		3	7	10+	15
65	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			3+				✓
66	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	20+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	10+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3	7	4	5+	C.20	40+	10+
70	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		1					
71	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		1	3	2	3	4	✓
72	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			4	4	1	2	✓
73	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>							4
74	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
75	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		4	2	1			
76	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		70+			150+	100+	✓
78	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		1	100+	50+			4+
79	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			1				
80	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>				3			
81	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>						2	
82	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			c.15	10+	8		
83	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		3	20+	20+	✓	✓	✓
84	Yellow-browed Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>					1		
85	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>						2	
86	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			3				
88	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
89	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			2	3	2	2	3
90	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1		4
91	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			1	2	1	1	1
92	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		1				4	1
93	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		1				5	
96	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		3		3	10+	10+	20+
97	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>							4
98	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November						
			27	28	29	30	31	1	2
99	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	10/+	7	5	6+	5+
100	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1				
101	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>						1	2
103	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Italian Sparrow	<i>Passer italiae</i>				2		✓	
105	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>						5+	
107	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				1			
108	Red Avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>					1	5+	
109	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1		3		1	1
110	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	2	10+	10+	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		1			1+		1
114	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>							2
115	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		10+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
116	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
117	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	5+	1		2	
118	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			2				

Mammals

1	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		2					
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓				

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Iberian Pond Tortoise	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>						✓	✓
2	Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>			1H				
3	Iberian Pond Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>						✓	

Insects

1	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓			✓	✓
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓	✓		
4	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>			✓				
5	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓	✓		✓	
6	Large Red Underwing	<i>Catocala nupta</i>		1	1		1		
7	Garden Bumblebee	<i>Bombus hortorum</i>				✓			
8	Blue-winged Grasshopper	<i>Trimerotropis cyaneipennis</i>						✓	
9	European Firebug	<i>Pyrrhocoris apterus</i>						✓	