

**Extremadura
11 – 18 March 2006**

Holiday participants

Ken Leggett	Suffolk
Shirley Awcock	East Sussex
Derek Tutt Zena Tutt	Kent
Cliff Thornley Jean Thornley	Canada

Leader

Martin Kelsey	Extremadura
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As with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the price of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for La Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO), the Spanish Ornithological Society, and its work in Extremadura. The conservation contribution this year of £25 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, leading to a total of £250. During the holiday Marcelino Cardalliaguet of SEO came to Finca Santa Marta to collect a cheque from this year's holiday in Extremadura.

This year's donation brings the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £10,063. The total conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays was at £38,645 at the end of 2005.

Extremadura

11 – 18 March 2006

Itinerary

Saturday 11th March: Gatwick to Madrid by Easyjet. To Trujillo via A5 autovia, with a stop before Talavera for snacks. Arrived at Finca Santa Marta mid-afternoon. Late afternoon walk through the property, and then along a track beyond the clump of stone pines above the Finca.

Sunday 12th March: Morning visit to Belén Plains, with coffee stop at Aldeacentenera. Lunch at a nearby crossing of the Almonte river. Return to Finca Santa Marta across country to Madroñera with stop on heathland on hill above the village. Dinner in La Troya, Trujillo.

Monday 13th March: From Trujillo to Torrejón El Rubío, then to Monfragüe Natural Park. Stop at Castle and then at car park opposite the crags of Peña Falcón. Brief stop at Puente de Cardenal. Coffee stop at Villareal de San Carlos, lunch at Mirador de Tajadilla, then to the Portilla del Tietár. Return with stop in pines near dam. Late afternoon walk along Almonte river.

Tuesday 14th March: South to Zorita and then towards Madrigalejo. Stop at Sierra Brava reservoir, and then exploring area of Casas del Hito, including visit to Charca del Hito (a large pool). Coffee stop just outside Madrigalejo, then visit to Vegas Altas, where lunch taken. Drive to rice fields near Palazuelo, then to Campo Lugar and the Zorita Plains. Quick return visit to Sierra Brava.

Wednesday 15th March: Free morning in Trujillo, then east towards Villuercus mountains via Deleitosa, with lunch on Almonte river near village of Cabañas del Castillo. Visit to village after lunch, with walk along base of cliffs.

Thursday 16th March: Exploring plains around Santa Marta de Magasca, coffee at the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, with lunch on Almonte river south of Monroy. Late afternoon visit to Guadiloba reservoir.

Friday 17th March: Pre-breakfast visit to plains east of Santa Marta de Magasca. Morning visit to Arrocampo reservoir, between Almaraz and Saucedilla (with coffee stop at latter village). Lunch beside Arroyo de la Vid near Jaraicejo. Early afternoon return to Finca Santa Marta because of heavy rain.

Saturday 18th March: Early morning departure to Madrid to check-in at airport shortly after 10 am for flight back to Gatwick.

Daily Diary

11th March: Gatwick to Finca Santa Marta

The flight from Madrid landed a good half hour ahead of schedule, but it was not until about 12.15 that we left Madrid airport. The reason for this was a problem with the back

seat of the minibus which meant a return to the hire company to get the vehicle replaced. The back seat in the replacement vehicle was not fixed in well either, but thanks to the some pushing and shoving we got it locked in place! The unanticipated stop outside the company office in a residential quarter near the airport at least got the group our first sightings of White Stork and Serin, and a chance to enjoy some warm spring sunshine. It was a lovely day as we eventually headed out of the city and on the relatively empty A5 motorway, heading south west for Extremadura. The snow-capped Gredos mountains formed a spectacular backdrop to the north, whilst the landscape really did look its best with carpets of spring flowers amongst the olives: campions, daisies and mustards. The rains had been much better this winter compared to last and as we got closer to Extremadura, so the landscape became greener still. We stopped for lunch snacks about 100 kms out of Madrid, and we quickly picked up Crested Lark singing and we took a closer look at the flora in an adjacent olive grove. As we continued along the motorway, we started to see Griffon Vultures passing overhead, some Red Kites and a Black Kite, whilst Derek also saw a Great Spotted Cuckoo being chased frantically by a Magpie. As we headed off the motorway onto the road that heads south-east from Trujillo, we passed first through some landscape dominated by huge blocks of granite, with a glorious spread of Purple Sand Spurrey and campions. Further along the road those sitting at the front of the van saw a large snake, most certainly Ladder Snake, on the road. Hopefully it was not going to spend too long basking in that spot! We arrived at Finca Santa Marta at 4pm. Soon tea was organised and we met Cliff and Jean, who had arrived a couple of days earlier. After tea, most of us took a wonderful late afternoon walk up through the Finca to the stand of stone pines and thence along a grassy track. Woodlark, Hoopoes and Short-toed Treecreepers sang as we watched large numbers of wintering Blackcap amongst brushwood, as well as Redwing. A Siskin was also heard. We found Sage-leaved Cistus in flower and an attractive small toadflax, amongst others. As we returned to the Finca at sunset, a pair of Red-rumped Swallows sailed around above the White Stork's nest. Our host, Henri welcomed us with cocktails followed by dinner.

12th March: Belén Plains, Almonte River and Madroñera

A fine clear and calm morning for what proved to be a warm spring day. A pre-breakfast walk produced a fly-over Hawfinch as well as the almost ubiquitous Hoopoes. Today we spent the morning on the open plains north-east of the small village of Belén. At our first stop just outside the village, affording us a superb panorama of the habitat, with the snow-clad Gredos beyond, we enjoyed the spectacle of a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos being chased by Magpies, which are their main host species. To and fro in hot pursuit, sometimes the birds passed close by, with the Great Spotted Cuckoo giving their far-carrying call, which gives them their Spanish name *críalo*. One settled on a field close by, presumably wanting to search for large caterpillars, but was soon chased off again by the Magpies. Just half a kilometre further on we stopped again, this time to watch a pair of Stone Curlew and also to take in the sight of the hundreds, if not thousands, of Hoop Petticoat Narcissus in bloom. As the morning progressed more and more Calandra Larks started to sing, circling at great height with their highly mimetic song. Often there would be rapid, ground level chases involving two or three birds. Flocks of Spanish Sparrows lined the roadside fence wires, whilst groups of wintering Lapwing and Golden Plover stood in the fields. We had excellent views of two Black-bellied Sandgrouse passing directly overhead, their presence detected first by their soft bubbling call. Nearby we found a total of five Great Bustards, including a displaying male, but they were rather distant.

We made another stop to view a multi-layered White Storks colony on some dead trees, next to a pool which hosted Shoveler, Mallard and a Little Grebe. As well as flocks of Spotless Starlings and Jackdaws on the trees, we also found a fine male Lesser Kestrel perched there and watched a further five Lesser Kestrels hunting insects over the plains. A freshly emerged and therefore pristine Spanish Festoon butterfly provided close views for us all, along with Clouded Yellows and Wall Browns. A wintering flock of 150 Little Bustard in flight offered us a fine spectacle as they wheeled and turned, sometimes appearing shimmering white against the landscape. The occasional Black Vulture cruised over, while groups of Griffon Vultures rose on thermals, sometimes accompanied by Black Kites.

After a stop at Bar Martín in Aldeacentera we drove up to the bridge over the Rio Almonte where we stopped for our picnic on the banks. Four Siskins, including three males, feeding on the bank-side alders, gave lovely views. After lunch we walked a little way up the river finding a pair of Kingfishers, Grey and White Wagtails and a Green Sandpiper. Small groups of Crag Martins, Swallows and House Martins hawked insects, and we enjoyed watching a pair of Red Kites displaying, circling close together higher and higher. It was a good spot for raptors, we saw seven species including a pair of Egyptian Vultures and an excellent view of a Short-toed Eagle. Purple Sand Crocuses were common as well as the basal leaves of Sea Squill and Common Asphodel.

After lunch we drove through the undulating dehesa to Madroñera, stopping first to watch a Black Stork descending down to feed at a small stream. We reached a patch of broom and lavender heathland. Here the density of the Hoop Petticoat Narcissus was even greater than that of the plains. One clump was visited by a Hummingbird Hawk Moth. Two male Dartford Warblers periodically appeared at the top of different bushes, sometimes for tantalizingly brief periods, but we also saw several Thekla Larks, as well as Sardinian Warblers and a distant swift.

Back at Finca Santa Marta, we went through the checklists before heading for Trujillo for dinner at the La Troya. Situated on the fine medieval town square, the restaurant provided an excellent series of local dishes.

13th March: Monfragüe and Almonte River

Another fine day and after breakfast we headed north from Trujillo to Monfragüe Natural Park. The route took us first through the rocky granite terrain around Trujillo, and then through dehesa as far as the eye could see, with the only changes being when we dropped down to cross three river valleys: the Tozo, the Almonte and finally the narrow Arroyo de la Vid. After the last crossing we followed the road winding up to the edge of the Monfragüe Park, heralded by a rocky ridge, capped by a small castle and a spectacular gorge through which passed the Tajo river. Our first stop was the castle itself which we reached by climbing up stone steps through groves of wild olive and cork oak. The view from the top was stunning: a vast dehesa panorama to the south, whilst to the north the hills of the park, the man-made lakes along the river valley and behind the snowy Gredos, becoming clearer as a morning haze dissipated. The birds themselves were even more breathtaking. We were very pleased to have close views of a Red-billed Chough, carrying nest material, around the castle, as well as a Hawfinch which sat quietly in a nearby wild olive. But pride of place were the fly-bys of Griffon Vultures, Black Vultures, as well as a self-confident Raven. Sometimes at eye-level,

sometimes just below us, we were treated to a series of wonderful portraits of birds in flight. It was good also to see birds like Red-rumped Swallows from above, appreciating views that are otherwise difficult to have. On our decent we got quick views of a Spanish Wall Lizard and Cliff saw a small snake briefly. More Hawfinches flew across the road as we drove to our next port of call, the famous Peña Falcón and Salto de Gitano (the Gypsy's leap). Here close to the base of the gorge, we enjoyed the sight of Griffon Vultures coming to their nests, sometimes carrying nest material. Many nests had birds incubating. A Peregrine wheeled high above the cliffs opposite, looking diminutive beside the Griffons. No fewer than five Black Stork were also present, with two of the pairs coming to land on flat rock ledges. By the car park, on the tips of twigs of a bare-tree we found a fine Nettle-tree Butterfly, the first of several that we saw during the day.

We stopped briefly opposite the Cardenal bridge to check some soaring raptors to find our first Egyptian Vultures of the day. As so often happens, one bird leads to another, Distant swifts were visible, but then we noticed four Alpine Swifts much nearer, along with hundreds of House Martins. After a stop at the bar of Villareal de San Carlos for refreshments, where dozens of House Martins and Swallows were busy collecting mud from the few remaining puddles, we continued through to Tajadilla, a lovely picnic spot just downstream from one of the dams along the course of the river. It overlooked another rock face with nesting Griffon Vultures. A pair of Short-toed Eagle were present, and then we saw a Bonelli's Eagle flying high over head. As we left, an Azure-winged Magpie, dropped in to collect crumbs. We had just started the engine, when Martin checked a group of soaring vultures and found the Bonelli's Eagle again: everyone was out of the bus again in four seconds flat to watch the raptor - an emergency drill couldn't have resulted in a faster evacuation!!

We drove across the dam, through pinewoods and then along the Tietár valley. We negotiated our way past a group of wayward cattle (including a brown bull) being marshalled along by three men on horseback and then stopped under the shade of cork oaks at the Portilla de Tietár, a picturesque spot with cliffs on the other side of the river and a wonderful vista to the north as the valley widened with the Gredos in the background. As Martin secured the van, the group made their way back along the road to the viewpoint. Bringing up the rear, Martin heard Spanish Imperial Eagle calls and a bird flew onto the nest on the hillside opposite, where its mate was sitting. The group were signalled back to see this, just as the group of cattle appeared coming round the corner. The cowboys had clearly lost control and the cattle, including the bull, were running along the road in our direction! The emergency drill "practiced" at the lunch stop paid off, with the rest of the group leaping for safety over the roadside safely barrier, whilst Zena and Martin, who were closer to the car, making a prudent but rapid retreat to the vehicle! Danger passed, everyone safe and our attention immediately returned to the Spanish Imperial eagles which during the course of the next hour provided breathtaking views, with on occasions the magnificent spectacle of aerial combat with Griffon Vultures, which were nesting on the adjacent cliffs.

We also found one of the pair of resident Eagle Owls, sitting on her nest on the cliff opposite, panting at times from the heat on this warm spring afternoon. Passing Black Storks gliding through and the banks of Angel Tears Narcissus, added to the beauty of this place.

Happy and satisfied, we headed back mid-afternoon, making a short stop at a nearby viewpoint where we enjoyed very close views of a Black Kite picking up dead fish from the water surface and apparently filleting them in flight just metres in front of us! At the same place a Short-toed Eagle on a pylon, flew off to pass at similarly close range just above our heads. Near the dam we paused in the pine woods and found an eventually obliging pair of Crested Tits. The afternoon culminated in a very pleasant walk along the banks of the Rio Almonte, full of the sounds of Spanish pond frogs, where we found Cirl Buntings and a fine show of Brandy Nut Iris.

14 March: Rice fields and plains near Madrigalejo

With another excellent weather forecast, we headed after breakfast south to the large areas of irrigation, largely under rice cultivation, where there are also zones of drier steppe and dehesa. A stop at the edge of the large Sierra Brava reservoir yielded some very distant Black-necked Grebes, along with Great-crested and a scattering of duck, as well as Little Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper on the shoreline. It was sad to find a dead Otter on the bank below the service road.

We then entered an area of mixed habitat, leading to rice fields, known as Casas del Hito. Southern Grey Shrike appeared as a common roadside bird, as well as flocks of Spanish Sparrows. The fine weather was certainly encouraging diurnal migration and overhead appeared a flock of nearly 40 Black Kites, which formed a spiral on a thermal and then headed north, disappearing almost as quickly as they had appeared. A newly arrived Woodchat Shrike settled on a bare tree next to the track, whilst just a few metres ahead a group of 37 Common Crane fed, vestiges of the huge winter flocks. The group were very tame and comprised many young birds. We drove up to a pool sited behind embankments and climbed up to peer over the edge. A fisherman on the bank had doubtless frightened many of the duck normally present away, but we were delighted to find 8 Garganey, along with a few Mallard. Two Grey Lag Geese were also present and a lovely party of four calling Greenshank flew overhead. We took a walk along the top of the embankment, finding the second Spanish Festoon of the week, as well as a smart singing male Sardinian Warbler. This was followed by a fine male Subalpine Warbler which obligingly gave prolonged close views as it busily fed amongst the verge-side flowers. It had probably just arrived from migration. As we left, it gave a few quiet phrases of song. Marsh Harriers circled high above us, whilst Derek saw a possible Golden Eagle, but at great distance: it was certainly proving to be a real treat of a warm spring day.

After a break for refreshments we travelled onto another rice field area, south of Madrigalejo, around the village of Vegas Altas, over which hunted a small group of Lesser Kestrels. Zitting Cisticolas sang continuously overhead, whilst from the tall roadside vegetation, where White Lupin was in bloom, small flocks of Red Avadavats rose, giving their weak, high-pitched calls. As we crossed an area of cereal cultivation to find a place for lunch, we found 7 male Great Bustards, resting in the early afternoon sun, and six Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew past low over the crop. A fine male Hen Harrier patrolled a regular circuit, passing us twice as we lunched, and shortly afterwards a female was also seen. On the nearby rice fields, where there was standing water we found a beautiful Water Pipit coming into summer plumage, walking, as befits its name, through the shallow water looking for insects. A party of 80 Black-tailed Godwit, many also in breeding plumage, foraged nearby. Crossing a small hill we

encountered another group of 14 male Great Bustards, giving us wonderfully close views, the afternoon sunshine bringing out their rich plumage to perfection.

We then headed to a third irrigated zone, near the village of Palazuelo. As we headed off the main road onto a small lane, Martin saw a rather odd-shaped bird perched on a fence post next to the lane. It was a Wryneck! It remained perched on the post as we pulled up along side, then flew to settle on a post just behind us, giving everyone memorable views. We stopped beside a small river to check out a good area of riverine habitat. Derek picked up a party of six Brambling in flight and we re-found two perched high in a eucalyptus. At a brief stop to check a Great Reed Mace filled ditch, we had very good views of Red Avadavat and Common Waxbill side-by-side. Most of the fields were quite dry, but from fields off the road, a man working on the land put up a large flock of Common Snipe, with a few Golden Plover, Dunlin and Black-tailed Godwit, whilst a little bit further on we encountered a group of waders on another field: Ruff, Common Redshank, Dunlin and yet more Black-tailed Godwits.

To complete the day we crossed the steppes of Zorita, from the village of Campo Lugar, with the late afternoon sun behind us. Both Cliff and Derek had seen distant birds they wanted to check out and as we were looking for them, a Black-winged Kite came into view, hunting at the back of a cereal field. Everyone quickly evacuated the van and were able to enjoy the sight of the bird hovering in its characteristic buoyant fashion. No sooner had it slipped from view, than 11 Great Bustards flew towards us, circled around and moved on. What a great day this had been for this bird! Ken then noticed something in the grass at our feet: a Giant Centipede, brightly coloured and poisonous! Calandra Larks chasing each other across the flower rich stepped grassland (there was a particularly lovely patch of Brandy Nut Lilies) provided a evocative finale.

Back at Finca Santa Marta in the evening, Marcelino Cardalliaguet, the Extremadura representative of the Spanish Ornithological Society (SEO), came to meet the group and give an illustrated talk on the conservation challenges facing the area. He received the cheque from the group, a donation from Honeyguide to support SEO's important work here.

15 March: Trujillo and Cabañas del Castillo

Another cloudless start to the day and we headed off after breakfast to spend the morning visiting Trujillo. The beautiful medieval town square and the narrow cobbled streets leading up to the castle are dominated by the old granite-built palaces and large churches built, testimony to the wealth brought back from South America by the conquistadores born in Trujillo. The same buildings with their old tiled roofs, support one of Spain's most important colonies of Lesser Kestrel as well as many pairs of Pallid Swift. Both species were easily seen on our arrival: the Pallid Swifts in fast-flying packs, whilst the Lesser Kestrels wheeled around above.

Late morning we left Trujillo and headed by the motorway to Deleitosa, stopping briefly to see over 30 Black Vultures and over a hundred Griffon Vultures on the ground where carcasses of large animals are often taken. We continued to the Villuercus mountains, a lovely series of ridges to the east of the dehesa and plains that we had been exploring over the last few days. We stopped for lunch at a crossing of the Rio Almonte, where the river passes through a narrow gorge and watched Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, as well as a Short-toed Eagle. Nearby is the tiny village of Cabañas

del Castillo, perched at the base of one of a pair of crags, on the top of which sits an ancient castle. As we walked through the village, a Rock Sparrow called a few times and later on a pair were all too briefly seen. The rocks above the village held Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes, and often we would be distracted by passing Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, a superb view of a Short-toed Eagle and a pair of Peregrines driving out a third individual (which looked like another female) from their territory. Crag Martins were building their nests under overhangs and Derek got a brief view of an Alpine Swift. On the eastern side of the crag, we had excellent views of both Rock and Cirl Buntings, as well as finding flowers such as Dwarf Sheep's Bit. A high-flying male Hen Harrier, presumably on migration, was quite a surprise. Approaching the village again, we found a very obliging male Black Wheatear, perched on the cross at the top of the church and flying up several times to the adjacent cliff face.

Returning to Trujillo, we made a second stop at the Almonte river crossing and enjoyed watching a Short-toed Eagle flying overhead carrying a snake which it was attempting to eat in flight! We waited for a few more minutes until Martin got a quick glimpse of a Golden Eagle disappearing over the hillside, most of the group got a brief view of it. Luckily it reappeared shortly afterwards, flying over head and circling a couple of times, close to a Griffon Vulture, before cruising off into the distance. That was Ken's most wanted bird of the day (if not for the week) so there were smiles all round!

For the first time, two Scops Owls were calling late in the evening.

16th March: Santa Marta de Magasca

A change in the weather with low cloud and early morning mist and it was to remain mainly overcast all day. Ken found a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on his pre-breakfast walk, drumming at the top of a telegraph post at the edge of the village of San Clemente, just as Martin had seen the day before in the same village. After breakfast, we checked the road near the neighbouring vineyard for Rock Sparrow, without success, but we did find Greenfinch, as well as Narrow-leaved Lupin in flower. We then drove west of Trujillo, taking the road to Santa Marta de Magasca. Out on the open plains we walked along a wide track, with Calandra Larks giving their wonderfully mimetic song. On three occasions we heard Pin-Tailed Sandgrouse, but they could not be located. However, we did find a small group of vultures on the ground, mainly Griffon but there were two Black Vultures, one of which could quite easily have been mistaken for a seated person, so great was its bulk! The ground was covered by thousands of hairy, two-tone (brown and grey) caterpillars, two of which we saw been carefully "handled" and then swallowed by Hoopoe.

We set off and after coffee in the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, we headed north to the Rio Almonte, where it forms a narrow rocky gorge, south of the village of Monroy, seeing a Woodchat Shrike just before reaching the valley itself. Here we had lunch, watching a herd of goats, looked over by a large *mastein* sheepdog, making their way across the hillside. A fine Black Kite flew downstream, whilst Crag Martins hawked insects. We then drove towards Cáceres, leaving the main road just north of the city, to cross the plains again. The fields were covered in flowers and the density of singing Corn Buntings was quite staggering. We also came across several small groups of Lesser Kestrels, providing us with excellent views as they perched on roadside fences, or hovered over the meadows. Another group of vultures on the ground gave us a superb opportunity to study Black and Griffon Vultures together at close range.

We ended the with a short visit to the Guadiloba Reservoir. There were a few Mallard, Gadwall and Shoveler present, along with Great Crested Grebe and Cormorant. Two Little Bustards flew over as we scanned the water and a small parties of Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls assembled to roost as evening approached.

17th March: Arrocampo and Jaraicejo

Although forecast for rain today, it dawned dry but overcast, as some of the group headed to the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca for a pre-breakfast foray for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. As soon as we had stopped we heard distant calls and saw a flock near the top of a distant rise in the ground. We drove back the road to be as close to that spot as possible, just as a farm worker started to walk across the field to check his sheep. The man put up one group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and then another and we had good, if distant views of about 70 birds in total. We stayed for a further fifteen minutes beside the field, enjoying the build-up of Calandra Lark song, as one bird after another rose in the sky to sing. It was wonderful. We also heard Stone Curlew and a Great Spotted Cuckoo.

After breakfast we headed up to motorway to Almaraz and the reservoir of Arrocampo. By the causeway there we stopped to look over a small section of the water, with its attractive fringing vegetation. Quickly we found a group of three Purple Swamphen and within minutes a Purple Heron perched nearby. All provided excellent views, sometimes in the same field of view. A group of Black-winged Stilts, and soon afterwards another, flew over calling. We could hear a Savi's Warbler reeling away, but it took a few minutes to find as it was rather further away than it seemed, as the strong southerly wind carried its call towards us. A brief snatch of Sedge Warbler song was also heard. A fine male Marsh Harrier quartered the reeds and rushes. We took a short walk along one side of this part of the site and found a small group of Common Waxbills. A thin drawn-out call drew our attention and seconds later a Penduline Tit flew across the vegetation, disappearing into the Great Reed Mace. By then the promised rain started to fall and we retreated to the van and headed to the village of Saucedilla for coffee. The rain was still falling as we left, but nevertheless we still braved a drive out on another track to the edge of the reservoir where we were rewarded with a sighting of Great White Egret and some huge White Stork nests on concrete jetties. Zena also had a quick view of a Kingfisher. We had superb views of Lesser Kestrels perched on wires next to the track as we returned to the road.

The rain became heavier and we headed back on the motorway to Jaraicejo and stopped for lunch beside the Arroyo de la Vid. After lunch we drove for a kilometre or so through heathland, hoping for some song activity from Dartford warblers, but the rain was forcing everything low. By now it was mid afternoon, so we elected to return to Finca Santa Marta for an early tea and an opportunity to organise packing and to rest before the following day's early departure. Although rain had cut the day short, it had been a very productive morning indeed. Indeed, we had escaped rain all week until the very last afternoon, so we had good reason to feel very satisfied with how the weather had treated us through the week.

18th March: Finca Santa Marta to Gatwick

Heavy rain continued all night and into the morning as we set off just after 7am for Madrid. There was little traffic on the motorway and despite a stop for coffee half way,

we still managed to arrive at the airport in just about three hours. The continuous rain meant that few birds were seen on the way back, nor was there much visibility. Instead we could reflect on the wonderful weather, wildlife and scenery during the holiday.

Postscript

We had been looking out for newly arrived Booted Eagles all week, but no joy. During a break in the rain on his way back to Trujillo, just outside the town, Martin saw a fine pale-phase Booted Eagle, soaring beside the motorway. As we discovered during the week's holiday, at this time of the year, new birds were arriving everyday and one never knows quite what one will see next!

Systematic list – Birds

A summary of sightings contributed by the whole group at the daily “call-over”

Little Grebe Present in small numbers on roadside pools, at total of six seen in the rice fields area.

Great Crested Grebe Present on most large bodies of water, a total of 25 seen from lay-by at Sierra Brava reservoir.

Black-necked Grebe Two seen distantly at Sierra Brava on 14th March.

Cormorant Seen daily along rivers and on water bodies, over 70 present at Monfragüe on 13th March.

Cattle Egret Seen almost daily.

Little Egret Small numbers seen most days around large pools and along rivers.

Great White Egret One present at Arrocampo on 17th March. Although still a rare winter visitor, this species is now being recorded more frequently in Extremadura.

Grey Heron Seen in small numbers almost every day.

Purple Heron Very good prolonged views of two at Arrocampo, with a third in flight, on 17th March.

Black Stork One seen near Madroñera on 12th March, ten in Monfragüe on 13th March and one along Almonte river on 16th March.

White Stork Common throughout the week, around towns and villages, as well as in the fields. Over 200 seen during the day spent in the rice fields on 14th March.

Spoonbill Two flying over the rice fields at Casas del Hito on 14th March.

Grey Lag Goose	Two at Casas del Hito on 14 th March.
Wigeon	Ten present at Sierra Brava reservoir on 14 th March.
Gadwall	Ten present at Sierra Brava on 14 th March, and pairs on pools on steppes near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16 th March. Also two at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Mallard	Pairs seen almost daily on roadside pools with small numbers present at Sierra Brava, Casas del Hito and Arrocampo.
Pintail	Two seen at a distance at Sierra Brava on 14 th March.
Garganey	Eight at Casas del Hito on 14 th March.
Shoveler	Seen most days on pools in the plains, as well on Sierra Brava and Arrocampo.
Tufted Duck	Two seen en route from Madrid on 11 th March and four seen at Sierra Brava on 14 th March.
Black-shouldered Kite	One hunting over cereal fields on the plains south of Zorita on 14 th March.
Black Kite	Single figures seen everyday, but a flock of 40 over the Casas del Hito rice fields on 14 th March were clearly on migration.
Red Kite	Single figures seen everyday, especially over dehesa.
Egyptian Vulture	Seen almost daily and generally in pairs.
Griffon Vulture	Good numbers seen everyday, especially at Monfragüe on 13 th March when at least 200 seen. The views from the castle there are especially memorable.
Black Vulture	Seen daily, often totalling double figures. Excellent views of birds on the ground near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16 th March.
Short-toed Eagle	Seen daily, often in pairs, with some superb close views obtained on occasions.
Marsh Harrier	At least ten seen during the day on the rice fields on 14 th March and a pair present at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Hen Harrier	Two males and a ring-tail on the rice fields on 14 th March and a migrating male passing over at great height over Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March.
Sparrowhawk	One male near the Finca on 11 th March and a female at Monfragüe on 13 th March.

- Common Buzzard** Seen daily.
- Spanish Imperial Eagle** Nesting pair at Monfragüe, seen on 13th March. The sight of the male chasing Griffon Vultures was one of the highlights of the trip.
- Golden Eagle** A sub-adult seen well over the upper reaches of Almonte river on 15th March. Derek saw a possible one distantly from Casas del Hito on 14th March.
- Bonelli's Eagle** One soaring with Griffon Vultures at Monfragüe on 13th March.
- Booted Eagle** No sightings of this common summer visitor during the week, but one soaring near Trujillo on Martin's return on 18th March.
- Lesser Kestrel** Seen daily, with over 50 seen around Trujillo on 15th March and 30 feeding over the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16th March. Excellent views obtained most days of this exquisite little falcon.
- Common Kestrel** Seen daily.
- Peregrine** An impressive spectacle of a pair chasing an intruding female at Cabañas del Castillo on 15th March, otherwise two seen at Monfragüe on 13th March, one with prey on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16th March with a distant bird at Guadiloba reservoir that afternoon.
- Red-legged Partridge** Seen daily.
- Water Rail** Heard on the rice fields 14th March.
- Moorhen** Common the rice fields and small numbers seen elsewhere.
- Purple Swamphen** Excellent views of at least ten birds at Arrocampo on 17th March.
- Coot** Present at the reservoirs of Sierra Brava, Guadiloba and Arrocampo.
- Common Crane** A group of 37 stragglers, mainly first-winter birds, still present at Casas del Hito on 14th March.
- Little Bustard** A winter flock of 150 present on Belén Plains on 12th March, and two at Guadiloba on 16th March.
- Great Bustard** Five birds seen distantly on Belén Plains on 12th March, but the best views were of two flocks totalling 21 males at Vegas Altas on 14th March, 11 birds seen in flight that same afternoon on plains south of Zorita.

- Stone Curlew** Three seen on Belén Plains on 12th March and one heard calling on plains near Santa Marta on 17th March. Heard calling by Martin at night at Pago de San Clemente on 16th March.
- Black-winged Stilt** Two flocks totalling 11 birds in flight over Arrocampo.
- Little Ringed Plover** Three birds at Sierra Brava on 14th March.
- Golden Plover** Over 300 seen in several flocks on Belén Plains on 12th March, 40 present on the rice fields on 14th March and 15 on the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16th March.
- Lapwing** Over 200 seen on Belen Plains on 12th March in several loose flocks, 40 on the rice fields on 14th March.
- Dunlin** 30 on rice fields near Palazuelo on 14th March.
- Ruff** 8 on rice fields at Palazuelo on 14th March.
- Snipe** At least 80 seen during the day in the rice fields on 14th March. Two at Arrocampo on 17th March.
- Black-tailed Godwit** A total of 130 seen at Vegas Altas and Palazuelo on flooded rice fields on 14th March.
- Redshank** Three at Palazuelo on 14th March.
- Greenshank** Four flying over Casas del Hito on 14th March and one on a pool on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16th March.
- Green Sandpiper** Seen most days, over ten seen on rice fields on 14th March.
- Common Sandpiper** One at Sierra Brava and one on rice fields on 14th March.
- Black-headed Gull** Over a hundred seen at the rice fields on 14th March, otherwise few seen.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull** Six at Guadiloba on 16th March and four at Arrocampo on 17th March.
- Black-bellied Sandgrouse** Excellent views of two in flight on Belén Plains on 12th March and six at Vegas Altas on 14th March.
- Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** Heard on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16th March and over 70 seen at same site early morning on 17th March.
- Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon** Seen daily
- Woodpigeon** Small numbers seen daily.

Collared Dove	Seen daily.
Great Spotted Cuckoo	One seen en route from Madrid on 11 th March. Superb views of three on Belén Plains on 12 th March, frequently chased by Magpies and three seen whilst driving to Monfragüe on 13 th March. Heard near Santa Marta de Magasca on 17 th March.
Common Cuckoo	Heard near Palazuelo on 14 th March and subsequently at Finca Santa Marta from 16 th March.
Scops Owl	Heard in the evening at the Finca from 15 th March.
Eagle Owl	Good views of incubating bird at Monfragüe on 13 th March.
Little Owl	Three seen at Belén Plains on 12 th March and heard most evenings at the Finca.
Pallid Swift	Over 20 present at Trujillo on 15 th March. Distant swifts seen during the week elsewhere were probably of this species.
Alpine Swift	Four seen at Monfragüe on 13 th March and one at Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March.
Kingfisher	Two seen on Almonte river on 12 th March, one heard on the rice fields on 14 th March and one seen by Zena at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Hoopoe	Commonly seen everyday.
Wryneck	Excellent views of one at Palazuelo on 14 th March.
Green Woodpecker	One near Almonte river on 12 th March.
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Heard near the Finca on 12 th March and one seen at Monfragüe on 13 th March.
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	One seen by Ken drumming on a telegraph post near village of Pago de San Clemente on 16 th March, the day after Martin saw one doing the same close by.
Calandra Lark	Seen on each visit to open plains, a characteristic and evocative song of this habitat.
Crested Lark	Common and seen daily.
Thekla Lark	Present in suitable habitat, especially on hills above Madroñera and near Santa Marta de Magasca.

Woodlark	Seen and/or heard almost daily, especially on pre-breakfast walks at the Finca.
Skylark	Three birds on pasture at Vegas Altas on 14 th March were the only records of this common winter visitor.
Sand Martin	A few birds present at Casas del Hito on 14 th March, but common at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Crag Martin	Common near bridges crossing Almonte river and in rocky areas in Monfragüe and in the Villuercus mountains.
Swallow	Common every day.
Red-rumped Swallow	Seen daily.
House Martin	Common every day.
Meadow Pipit	Small numbers seen almost daily.
Water Pipit	Individuals coming into breeding plumage on rice fields at Vegas Altas and Palazuelo on 14 th March.
Grey Wagtail	Small numbers seen daily.
White Wagtail	Small numbers seen daily.
Wren	Heard, but not seen, every day!
Robin	Small numbers seen daily.
Black Redstart	Present around the Finca and also seen at Monfragüe on 13 th March and Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March, where at least six present.
Stonechat	Common and seen every day.
Black Wheatear	Excellent views of a male at Cabañas del Castillo.
Blue Rock Thrush	Seen most days in suitable habitat.
Blackbird	Seen daily.
Song Thrush	Seen daily.
Redwing	10 near the Finca on 11 th March.
Mistle Thrush	Small numbers seen most days.

Cetti's Warbler	At least six recorded on the rice fields on 14 th March and three at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Zitting Cisticola	Recorded on Belén Plains on 12 th March, the rice fields on 14 th March, plains near Santa Marta de Magasca on 16 th March and Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Savi's Warbler	One singing at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Sedge Warbler	One burst of song heard at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Dartford Warbler	Two singing above Madroñera on 12 th March.
Subalpine Warbler	Superb views of a newly arrived male at Casas del Hito on 14 th March.
Sardinian Warbler	Seen daily.
Blackcap	Seen daily and in good numbers (over 20) around Finca.
Chiffchaff	Seen daily and especially numerous in waterside vegetation.
Long-tailed Tit	Small numbers seen.
Crested Tit	Pair at Monfragüe on 13 th March.
Blue Tit	Seen daily.
Great Tit	Seen daily.
Penduline Tit	One at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Short-toed Treecreeper	Seen and heard daily, especially around the Finca.
Southern Grey Shrike	Seen daily and particularly numerous on the rice fields where over 25 seen on 14 th March.
Woodchat Shrike	One seen at Casas del Hito on 14 th March was the first of the season of this common summer visitor. Others seen later in the week.
Jay	One seen at Monfragüe on 13 th March.
Azure-winged Magpie	Commonly seen everyday, the evening flocks at the Finca sometimes numbered almost 40.
Magpie	Commonly seen every day.
Red-billed Chough	An individual carrying nest material near the castle at Monfragüe on 13 th March.

Jackdaw	Commonly seen everyday, over 150 seen during the morning visit to Trujillo on 15 th March.
Raven	Seen daily, with superbly close views at the castle in Monfragüe on 13 th March.
Spotless Starling	Common every day.
House Sparrow	Common every day.
Spanish Sparrow	Seen commonly everyday, often in hundreds.
Tree Sparrow	One heard at Palazuelo on 14 th March.
Rock Sparrow	Heard and seen briefly at Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March.
Common Waxbill	Small flocks seen at Palazuelo on 14 th March and at Arrocampo on 17 th March.
Red Avadavat	Small flocks on the rice fields on 14 th March.
Chaffinch	Small numbers seen every day.
Brambling	Six in maize stubble near Palazuelo on 14 th March.
Serin	Seen very day, often in song-flight.
Greenfinch	Two birds near the Finca on 16 th March.
Goldfinch	Small flocks seen daily.
Siskin	One heard near the Finca on 11 th March and four on alders along River Almonte on 12 th March.
Linnet	Seen daily.
Hawfinch	Recorded almost every morning at the Finca, as well as around the castle at Monfragüe on 13 th March and along Almonte river on 16 th March.
Cirl Bunting	Seen along Almonte river on 13 th March and Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March.
Rock Bunting	Seen at Monfragüe on 13 th March and Cabañas del Castillo on 15 th March.
Corn Bunting	Seen daily. On plains near Santa Marta de Magasca present at density of one almost every hundred metres. Still some winter flocks evident.

Wildlife sightings of the week, as nominated by group members

Hoopoes – Ken Leggett
Subalpine Warbler – Shirley Awcock
Imperial Eagle chasing Griffon Vultures, group of male Great Bustards in afternoon light – Derek Tutt
The flora in general, the group of male Great Bustards – Zena Tutt
Wryneck, Imperial Eagle chasing Griffon Vultures, Kingfisher – Cliff Thornley
Hoopoes, Otter (unfortunately dead) – Jean Thornley

MAMMALS

Otter *Lutra lutra*
Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*
Iberian Hare *Lepus granatensis*
Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
Iberian mole *Talpa occidentalis*

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Spanish (stripe-necked) terrapin *Mauremys caspica*
Ladder snake *Elaphe scalaris*
Iberian wall lizard *Podarcis hispanica*
Moorish gecko *Tarentola mauretanic*
Natterjack toad *Bufo calamita*
Stripeless tree frog *Hyla meridionalis*
Iberian pool frog *Rana perezi*
Marbled newt *Triturus marmoratus*

BUTTERFLIES

Spanish Festoon
Small White
Bath White
Clouded Yellow
Nettle-tree Butterfly
Red Admiral
Small Heath
Wall Brown
Small Copper

OTHER INVERTEBRATES

Mole Cricket *Gryllotalpa grylloptalpa*
Giant Centipede *Scolopendra cingulatus*
Hummingbird Hawk-moth *Macroglossum stellatarum*
Pine processionary moth *Thaumetopoea pityocampa*

PLANTS

(Selected species)

Numbers on the right refer to Blamey & Grey-Wilson, **Mediterranean Wild Flowers**

Pinaceae	<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Stone/umbrella Pine (3)
Cupressaceae	<i>Juniperus communis</i>	Common Juniper (13)
Fagaceae	<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i> <i>Q. suber</i>	Evergreen Oak (26) Cork Oak (27)
Ulmaceae	<i>Ulmus minor</i>	Elm sp (c.38)
Urticaceae	<i>Urtica membranacea</i>	Membranous nettle (49)
Caryophyllaceae	<i>Spergularia purpurea</i> <i>Silene colorata</i>	Purple Sand-spurrey (148) Campion sp (180)
Ranunculaceae	<i>Ranunculus sp.</i> <i>R. macrophyllus</i>	Water Crowfoot sp. Large-leaved buttercup (237)
Fumariaceae	<i>Fumaria capreolata</i>	Ramping Fumitory (303)
Cruciferae	<i>Matthiola sp.</i> <i>Eruca sativa</i>	A stock Eruca (361)
Crassulaceae	<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>	Navelwort
Leguminosae	<i>Acacia dealbata</i> <i>Astragalus lusitanicus</i> <i>Cytisus multiflorus</i> <i>Cytisus scoparius</i> <i>Lupinus angustifolius</i> <i>Medicago arabica</i>	Silver Wattle (432) Iberian Milk-vetch (504) White Broom Broom (456) Narrow-leaved Lupin (486) Spotted Medick
Oxalidaceae	<i>Oxalis pes-caprae</i>	Bermuda Buttercup
Geraniaceae	<i>Geranium lucidum</i> <i>G. molle</i> <i>G. rotundifolium</i>	Shining Cranesbill (749) Dovesfoot Cranesbill (741) Round-leaved Cranesbill (743)
Violaceae	<i>Viola (arvensis) kitaibeliana</i>	Dwarf Pansy (931)
Cistaceae	<i>Cistus salviifolius</i> <i>C. ladanifer</i>	Sage-leaved Cistus (965) Gum Cistus (971)
Cactaceae	<i>Opuntia maxima (=ficus-indica)</i>	Prickly Pear (1040)

Umbelliferae	<i>Ferula communis</i> <i>Smyrniium olustratum</i>	Giant Fennel (1141) Alexanders (1087)
Ericaceae	<i>Arbutus unedo</i> <i>Erica arborea</i> <i>Erica lusitanica</i>	Strawberry Tree (1176) Tree Heath (1178) Portuguese Heath (1179)
Primulaceae	<i>Anagallis monelli</i>	Blue Pimpernel (1202)
Oleaceae	<i>Olea europaea</i>	Olive (1248)
Boraginaceae	<i>Anchusa undulata</i>	Undulate anchusa (1406)
Labiatae	<i>Lamium maculatum</i> <i>Lamium amplexicaule</i> <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i> <i>Lavandula stoechas</i>	Spotted Deadnettle (1476) Henbit Deadnettle (1478) Rosemary (1526) French Lavender (1528)
Solanaceae	<i>Hyosciamus albus</i>	White Henbane (1555)
Scrophularicaea	<i>Linaria amethystea</i> <i>L. spartea</i>	an amethyst toadflax a yellow toadflax
Campanulaceae	<i>Jasione crispa</i>	Dwarf Sheep's Bit
Compositae	<i>Anthemis cotula</i> <i>Bellis annua</i> <i>B. sylvestris</i> <i>Calendula arvensis</i> <i>Silybum marianum</i>	Stinking Mayweed (1867) Annual Daisy (1791) Southern Daisy (1793) Field Marigold (1908) Milk Thistle (1982)
Liliceae	<i>Asphodelus aestivus</i> <i>Gagea elliptica</i> <i>Urginea maritima</i> <i>Muscari neglectum</i> <i>Narcissus triandrus papyraceus</i> <i>N. bulbocodium</i>	Common Asphodel (2089) Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem (2106) Sea Squill (2163) Grape Hyacinth (2206) Angel's Tears Hoop-petticoat Narcissus (2281)
Iridaceae	<i>Gynandriris sisyrinchium</i> <i>Romulea columnae</i>	Barbary Nut Iris (23059) Sand Crocus (2320)