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WINTER TOUR FOR ALAN AND LYNN

FEBRUARY 2008

By Martin Kelsey

ITINERARY

Day 1: Wednesday 20th February

Pick-up Madrid: 14.20
Brief stop at Arrocampo
Arrive at Casa Rural El Recuerdo by 19.00

Day 2: Thursday 21st February

Monfragüe National Park
Rio Almonte

Day 3: Saturday 23rd February

Plains west of Trujillo and Santa Marta de Magasca

Day 4: Sunday 24th February

Rice fields near Madrigalejo

Day 5: Monday 25th February

Jaraicejo, Arrocampo and back to Madrid.

TRIP REPORT

Day 1

Martin met Alan and Lynn at Madrid airport, their plane arriving punctually at 13.55. Despite the sometimes threatening clouds, it remained fine all afternoon, with some sunshine by the time we stopped late afternoon for a quick visit to the reservoir of Arrocampo, one of the best wetlands in Extremadura. We went first of all to the pool of Cerro Alto, behind the village of Saucedilla, where groups of **Barn Swallows** perched on the wires. On the way to Cerro Alto, we had excellent views of a pair of **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, the female settling briefly on a tree, before being chased off by a **Magpie**. There was a splendid male **Stonechat** in the some tree and wintering **Reed Buntings** in the rushes nearby. At Cerro Alto, a pair of **Spoonbill** afforded us good views along with

two **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Green** and **Common Sandpiper**, **Lapwing** and **Shoveler**. Raptors included **Common Kestrel**, **Sparrowhawk** and **Marsh Harrier**. After stopping for views of roadside **Corn Bunting**, **Crested Lark** and **Southern Grey Shrike**, we checked an area of waterside vegetation where we had close views of several **Purple Swamphen**, as well as a **Great White Egret**, **Coot** and **Moorhen**. **Chiffchaffs** darted out of the vegetation to catch flies. There were good numbers of **White Storks**, their nests balanced high on pylons.

Reluctantly we had to pull ourselves away in order to complete our journey, getting to Casa Rural El Recuerdo in time for dinner and an early night.

Day 2

With fine weather forecast for the day, we headed north of Trujillo to the Monfragüe National Park. The journey took us initially through the granite outcrops around Trujillo, then across kilometre after kilometre of *dehesa* (holm oak grazing woodland), until we passed through the small town of Torrejón El Rubio and approached the rocky escarpment of Monfragüe. A bank of fog hung over parts of the ridge, but within minutes it had dissipated, so by the time we reached our first stop, the impressive gorge of Peña Falcón, the cloud had risen to expose almost the whole cliff face. **Griffon Vultures** were starting to pitch themselves off the rocks and circled gently upwards on a weak thermal. It was not long before the cloud had gone completely and the sky was filled with vultures. We saw a couple of the massive **Black Vultures**, including one perched on a rock in the sunshine. An **Egyptian Vulture** also wheeled past, the first of about six that we would see during the day. Closer at hand, **Black Redstart**, **Rock Bunting** and **Blue Rock Thrush** were of interest, as were a pair of **Red-billed Chough** calling and tumbling above us. **Crag Martins** wheeled past and then we heard the characteristic barking call of **Spanish Imperial Eagles** and were pleased to see a pair of sub-adult birds, circling above us, the sun catching the pale leading edge to the wing when the angle was right. A juvenile **Bonelli's Eagle** also flew across, appearing very sandy-coloured, with distinct well defined black tips to the primaries. Whilst all of this was going on, a **Black Stork** stood in a very stately way, on its nest low down the cliff face in small cave.

Crossing the River Tajo, we stopped at Villareal de San Carlos and watched **House Martins** and **Swallows** collecting mud for their nests. The trumpeting of cranes was heard, and then from the south appeared a 'V' formation of about 60 **Common Crane**. As they approached the formation broke up and for a few minutes the cranes appeared disorientated, almost leaderless. They made a couple of abortive attempts to reform, before circling once more and then heading again northwards in a double 'V' formation. It was a wonderful sight. We then drove eastwards, stopping first beside the river and then in a belt of pines. Here we spent several minutes searching for **Hawfinches**, which were proving elusive, despite showing their proximity to us by frequent calling. Eventually, through perseverance, Alan got a good view of one. We also saw a couple of **Red-rumped Swallows**. Whilst there, an adult **Bonelli's Eagle** swung into view, showing its distinctive plumage clearly. A **Peregrine** flew

below it, dwarfed by the eagle. After lunch there, we proceeded along the road, stopping at a viewpoint to watch a **Black Stork** in flight and a small group of **Azure-winged Magpies**. We then proceeded to the gorge at Portilla del Tietár. The highlight here was an incubating **Eagle Owl**, and we had good views of the bird, especially when it went through an episode of active preening. An adult **Spanish Imperial Eagle** was also airborne at one point and there were good numbers of **Griffon Vultures**. We enjoyed a walk in a nearby Cork Oak dehesa, which seemed full of **Chaffinches**. We got a glimpse of a **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and then located by call a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, eventually tracking it down to a bare Ash tree, where we watched it briefly, before it flew overhead.

We then returned through the park, making a final stop at Peña Falcon, where we had good views of a perched **Red-billed Chough** and a pair of **Egyptian Vultures** with the host of **Griffon Vultures**. Finally we enjoyed a late afternoon walk beside the Rio Almonte, seeing **Thekla Lark**, **Corn Bunting**, **Stonechat**, **Chiffchaff** and a very bright male **Serin**.

Day 3

An overnight front had brought high winds and some light rain in the early hours of the morning, and by the time we left Casa Rural El Recuerdo light rain was falling again. However it quickly eased and, apart from a few drops of rain once or twice during the day, we enjoyed dry, if overcast, weather. As we passed through Trujillo three or four **Lesser Kestrels** were wheeling over the Bull Ring and **White Storks** were bill clacking from nests perched on most of the old buildings. We took the road west towards Cáceres, leaving it at the junction for Santa Marta de Magasca. After a couple of kilometres of dehesa, we entered open country. We stopped for a scan and fairly quickly found a group of almost 20 **Little Bustards**, feeding at some distance from us. A pair of **Crested Lark** was on the ground close-by whilst **Corn Buntings** appeared to be singing from almost every direction. We drove a little further, stopping beside a large sheep-grazed field. On the sky-line we found a large group of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** feeding and we had good views. **Calandra Larks** chased each other across the field, whilst nearby an **Egyptian Vulture** walked purposefully. On the road again, we stopped for a remarkably tame **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, which sat on the roadside fence right beside us. Nearby was a track from which we scanned the fields. However, a tractor was working, so not much was seen, apart from the **White Storks** and **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** following the plough. A fine **Red Kite** passed overhead whilst **Thekla Larks** perched on the nearby fence posts. The rain was intensifying slightly, so we moved on towards the village of Santa Marta de Magasca for coffee, but not before getting good views of a pair of **Woodlark** and our first glimpse of **Great Bustard**, a rather distant flight view.

After our break, we made a stop at the Rio Tamuja, where we enjoyed excellent views of **Hawfinches** perched non overhead cables, as well as a **Kingfisher**, **Red-rumped Swallows** and **Crag Martins**. Climbing the other side of the valley, we soon entered open country again. A **Black Vulture** stood massively in a roadside field. Taking a side road, we quite quickly found a small group of **Great Bustards** and then a larger group (of about 12 birds) which were fairly

close and in good light. Nearby a flock of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** settled and we had even better views than which we had been offered earlier on.

We then drove to Talaván for lunch, seeing a **Golden Eagle** in flight whilst driving there, unfortunately from a stretch of road that we could not stop on. However, later we had views of a **Golden Eagle** in flight and then perched on a nearby small pylon. It was hard to imagine getting closer views of this powerful bird. At a reservoir there were **Little** and **Great-crested Grebe**, **Teal**, **Shoveler** and **Mallard**. A female **Sardinian Warbler** skulked in the bushes close to the car.

Thence to Monroy, passing a small group of **Common Crane** in dehesa close to the road and a female **Hen Harrier**. South of Nonroy we stopped at the Rio Almonte, and one of the first birds seen was a male **Black Wheatear**, the browner female being seen a few minutes later close by. Overhead an **Egyptian** and several **Griffon Vultures** soared, whilst beside the river **Chiffchaffs** flew upwards in search of insects, and both **White** and **Grey Wagtails** patrolled the riversides. A **Black Redstart** was also present.

From the valley we crossed a plateau of open country again, seeing a group of **Hen Harriers** (two males and two females) heading east, with a large female **Sparrowhawk** warding them off. At a further stop, we came across a large flock of **Linnets**, with **Greenfinches** and **Goldfinches**, whilst there were also flocks of **Skylark** and **Calandra Lark**, the latter showing-off their dark underwings and white training edges. A few minutes at the Rio Magasca yielded a fine male **Cirl Bunting**, whilst a few minutes later two **Black Stork** flew over. Finally a return visit to our first stop of the day, gave us an opportunity of closer views of a small group of **Little Bustard**, including the fine sight of one flying in to join them.

Day 4

A damp and windy start to the day, but following rain in the morning, we enjoyed a progressively sunnier and calmer afternoon. We took the road south, through Zorita and then to the rice-growing region near the town of Madrigalejo. Stopping first near the village of Palazuelo, we watched large flocks of **Spanish Sparrows**, with males coming into pristine breeding plumage. A female **Merlin** swept past in its dashing flight. Small parties of **Red Avadavats** and **Common Waxbills** bounced ahead of us in the roadside ditches as we crossed the rice fields. Groups of **Common Crane** were scattered in the area, some close to the road and affording us excellent views. **Hoopoes** were very common: twos and threes frequently flying up from the roadside. Beside the Rio Ruercas, we took a short walk. Four or five **Cetti's Warblers** were singing from dense vegetation, whilst **Azure-winged Magpies** trooped through the gallery woodland. But the rain at that stage was fairly persistent, so we repaired to a bar for some coffee, but not before spending a few minutes watching about six **Stone Curlew** at their roost.

We then visited another rice-growing area south of Madrigalejo, near the village of Vegas Altas. Here a mosaic of cultivations provided a variety of terrains:

maize stubble, rice, cereal crops, plough and fallow. We had just left the main road, when we saw four **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** in flight. A further exploration there revealed five more sandgrouse and five male **Great Bustards**, rather distant but well worth studying at length because three of them were already engaged in some lekking display. Whilst we watched them a party of about a hundred **Black-tailed Godwit** flew over. We checked some wetter fields and found a small group of godwits, as well as **Little Ringed Plover**, **Green Sandpiper** and many **Common Snipe**. Whilst we were there four male **Great Bustards** flew past at incredibly close range and settled nearby to feed. In a flooded field nearby a **Water Pipit** was found, its plumage changing to summer dress.

We then drove onto Moheda Alta for lunch. **Common Cranes** were in the dehesa woodland as well as the rice and maize stubble. We climbed the embankment of a large pool and were delighted to find a group of 16 **Garganey** (14 drakes and two ducks). A **Little Ringed Plover** and three **Common Sandpiper** provided additional interest, whilst **Red Kite**, **Marsh Harrier** and **Common Buzzard** were overhead.

Following lunch we spent the afternoon in the rice fields around Casas del Hito. Approaching the area, we had wonderful views of a pair of **Black-winged Kite**. Hundreds of **Common Cranes** were on the rice stubble, taking off as we approached to settle nearby on out-lying stubble fields or on pasture. **Marsh Harriers** quartered the area. A party of about 15 **Avocet** was on the pool of water there, along with **Shoveler**, **Mallard** and a few **Pintail**. On flooded fields a few **Black-tailed Godwit** and a **Greenshank** were present, along with gulls and **Lapwing**. We returned to the car, walking beside a ditch along which there were no fewer than four **Bluethroat**, although almost all of our views were of birds in flight., Good numbers of **Reed Buntings** were also present.

We made a final stop at the reservoir of Sierra Brava. The water was quite choppy, but we saw groups of **Great Crested Grebe**, some **Gadwall** and a party of **Tufted Duck** on a small pool. A pair of **Lesser Kestrel** gave their soft chattering call from a derelict barn.

Day 5

Despite night rain, it dawned bright, albeit with a fresh breeze. Farewells were made at Casa Rural El Recuerdo and we headed to Trujillo and then up the motorway to Jaraicejo to make a brief visit to an area of heath. Our target was **Dartford Warbler** and birds were seen twice in flight. The place was full of **Thekla Larks**, **Corn Buntings** and **Meadow Pipits**. We then made a return visit to Arrocampo and spent about an hour tracking down **Penduline Tit**. A singing bird was located, but it proved quite elusive in a rather densely foliated tree, before flying off. However we had good views of **Zitting Cisticola**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Marsh Harriers** and **Great White Egret**. Soon it was time to make the journey north-eastwards to Madrid and we reached the airport as planned at 13.00, in good time for the check-in and a few minutes to reminisce over the trip's highlights.

BIRDS RECORDED

Excellent results were obtained in this short winter break, despite juggling plans to suit the weather, with an overall list of 130 species were recorded.

1. **Little Grebe:** Several at Talaván.
2. **Great Crested Grebe:** Two at Talaván and also seen at Sierra Brava.
3. **Great Cormorant:** Seen daily, both on large bodies of water as well as along rivers.
4. **Cattle Egret:** Common, especially on the ricefields.
5. **Little Egret:** Small numbers seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields.
6. **Great White Egret:** One at Arrocampo on both visits.
7. **Grey Heron:** Singles seen almost daily.
8. **Black Stork:** Several seen at Monfragüe and one north of Santa Marta de Magasca.
9. **White Stork:** Common and seen everyday.
10. **Spoonbill:** Two at Cerro Alto (Arrocampo) on 20th February.
11. **Grey Lag Goose:** Three or four near Madrigalejo on 24th February.
12. **Gadwall:** Small numbers on Sierra Brava.
13. **Teal:** Present at Talaván and near Madrigalejo.
14. **Pintail:** Small numbers seen near Madrigalejo.
15. **Mallard:** Seen almost daily.
16. **Garganey:** 16 (14 males and two females) on a pool at Moheda Alta on 24th February. This was one of the highlights of the trip.
17. **Shoveler:** Small numbers at Cerro Alto, Talaván and near Madrigalejo.
18. **Black-winged Kite:** Excellent views of two near Madrigalejo.
19. **Black Kite:** One seen on return to Madrid on 25th February.
20. **Red Kite:** Seen daily.
21. **Egyptian Vulture:** About six seen at Monfragüe and also present near Santa Marta de Magasca.
22. **Griffon Vulture:** Seen almost daily.
23. **Black Vulture:** Seen almost daily.
24. **Marsh Harrier:** Several at Arrocampo and over the ricefields.
25. **Hen Harrier:** Six seen (including a group of two males and two females) near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd February.
26. **Sparrowhawk:** Males seen at arrocampo and Monfragüe and a female mobbing Hen Harriers near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd February .
27. **Common Buzzard:** Seen daily.
28. **Spanish Imperial Eagle:** A pair at Peña Falcón and one at the Portilla del Tietár, Monfragüe 21st February.
29. **Golden Eagle:** Excellent views of a bird perched on a pylon and in flight near Talaván 23rd February.
30. **Bonelli's Eagle:** One adult and a juvenile in Monfragüe on 21st February.
31. **Lesser Kestrel:** Seen in Trujillo.
32. **Common Kestrel:** Seen daily.
33. **Merlin:** A female at Palazuelo on 24th February and one over the motorway on the return to Madrid on 25th February.
34. **Peregrine Falcon:** One at Monfragüe on 21st February.

35. **Red-legged Partridge:** Several seen, particularly near Santa Marta de Magasca.
36. **Quail:** Several calling in the rice fields near Madrigalejo.
37. **Water Rail:** Heard at Talaván and on the rice fields.
38. **Moorhen:** Seen most days.
39. **Purple Swamphen:** Excellent views at Arrocampo.
40. **Common Coot:** Seen most days.
41. **Common Crane:** Seen daily. Large flocks on the rice fields near Madrigalejo and smaller groups near Monroy and migrating skeins over Monfragüe.
42. **Little Bustard:** A small winter flock of about 20 near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd February, including a couple of males moulting into breeding plumage.
43. **Great Bustard:** About 18 west of Santa Marta de Magasca and nine near Vegas Altas, including three males starting display.
44. **Black-winged Stilt:** Two at Cerro Alto on 20th February.
45. **Avocet:** About 15 near Madrigalejo on 24th February.
46. **Stone Curlew:** 6 in stubble near Madrigalejo.
47. **Little Ringed Plover:** One at Vegas Altas and another at Moehda Alta on 24th February.
48. **Golden Plover:** A party of about 20 near Santa Marta de Magasca and a single bird at Casas del Hito.
49. **Lapwing:** Seen daily in good numbers.
50. **Dunlin:** About ten in flooded rice fields near Palazuelo.
51. **Common Snipe:** Present in good numbers on the rice fields.
52. **Black-tailed Godwit:** Two at Cerro Alto and about 100 at Vegas Altas.
53. **Common Redshank:** One at Cerro Alto on 20th February.
54. **Greenshank:** Three at Casas del Hito.
55. **Green Sandpiper:** Seen almost daily.
56. **Common Sandpiper:** Seen at Cerro Alto and at Moheda Alta.
57. **Lesser Black-backed Gull:** Seen almost daily.
58. **Black-headed Gull:** Seen almost daily.
59. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse:** Nine seen at Vegas Altas on 24th February.
60. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse:** A flock of perhaps 60 birds east of Santa Marta de Magasca and another flock, probably smaller, to the west on 23rd February.
61. **Rock Dove/Feral Dove:** Seen daily.
62. **Wood Pigeon:** Seen almost daily.
63. **Collared Dove:** Seen daily.
64. **Great Spotted Cuckoo:** Two at Arrocampo on 20th February, two near Santa Marta de Magasca on 23rd February and one from motorway on 25th February.
65. **Eagle Owl:** One seen in Monfragüe.
66. **Little Owl:** Heard most evenings at Casa Rural El Recuerdo.
67. **Kingfisher:** Seen on Rio Tamuja and the ricefields.
68. **Hoopoe:** Seen daily.
69. **Great Spotted Woodpecker:** Seen at Monfragüe and near Palazuelo.
70. **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker:** A female at Monfragüe on 21st February.
71. **Calandra Lark:** Seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
72. **Crested Lark:** Seen daily.

- 73. Thekla Lark:** Seen on plains near Santa Marta de Magasca and at Jaraicejo.
- 74. Woodlark:** In deshesa near Santa Marta de Magasca.
- 75. Skylark:** Wintering flocks on plains.
- 76. Sand Martin:** Seen at Arrocampo.
- 77. Crag Martin:** Seen almost daily.
- 78. Barn Swallow:** Seen daily.
- 79. Red-rumped Swallow:** Singles seen at Monfragüe and along Rio Tamuja.
- 80. House Martin:** Seen almost daily.
- 81. Meadow Pipit:** Seen daily.
- 82. Water Pipit:** One coming into breeding plumage seen very well near Vegas Altas.
- 83. Grey Wagtail:** One on Rio Almonte.
- 84. White Wagtail:** Seen daily.
- 85. Wren:** Seen at Monfragüe.
- 86. Robin:** Seen daily.
- 87. Bluethroat:** Four or five seen at Casas del Hito on 24th February.
- 88. Black Redstart:** Seen almost daily.
- 89. Stonechat:** Seen daily.
- 90. Black Wheatear:** A pair on Rio Almonte south of Monroy on 23rd February.
- 91. Blue Rock Thrush:** Seen at Monfragüe.
- 92. Blackbird:** Seen daily.
- 93. Song Thrush:** Seen daily.
- 94. Mistle Thrush:** Seen at Monfragüe.
- 95. Cetti's Warbler:** Seen at Arrocampo and the ricefields. Heard at Monfragüe.
- 96. Zitting Cisticola:** Seen almost daily.
- 97. Dartford Warbler:** A pair seen in flight at Jaraicejo.
- 98. Sardinian Warbler:** Seen near Talaván.
- 99. Blackcap:** seen at Monfragüe and near Rio Almonte.
- 100. Chiffchaff:** Seen daily.
- 101. Long-tailed Tit:** Seen almost daily.
- 102. Blue Tit:** Seen daily.
- 103. Great Tit:** Seen daily.
- 104. Nuthatch:** Heard at Monfragüe.
- 105. Short-toed Treecreeper:** Seen briefly at Monfragüe.
- 106. Penduline Tit:** Brief views of a male at Arrocampo on 25th February.
- 107. Southern Grey Shrike:** Seen daily.
- 108. Jay:** Heard at Monfragüe.
- 109. Azure-winged Magpie:** Seen daily.
- 110. Magpie:** Seen daily.
- 111. Red-billed Chough:** A pair at Monfragüe.
- 112. Jackdaw:** Seen almost daily.
- 113. Raven:** Seen almost daily.
- 114. Spotless Starling:** Seen daily.
- 115. House Sparrow:** Seen daily.
- 116. Spanish Sparrow:** Large numbers on the rice fields.
- 117. Tree Sparrow:** Seen on the ricefields.

118. **Red Avadavat:** Seen on the ricefields.
119. **Common Waxbill:** Seen on the ricefields.
120. **Chaffinch:** Seen almost daily.
121. **Serin:** Seen daily.
122. **Greenfinch:** Seen almost daily.
123. **Goldfinch:** Seen daily.
124. **Siskin:** One flying overhead at Palazuelo.
125. **Linnet:** Seen almost daily.
126. **Hawfinch:** Excellent views at Rio Tamuja, also seen at Monfragüe.
127. **Cirl Bunting:** One seen at Rio Magasca.
128. **Rock Bunting:** Seen at Monfragüe and along Rio Almonte.
129. **Reed Bunting:** Seen at Arrocampo and the rice fields.
130. **Corn Bunting:** Good numbers seen daily.