

TRIP TO EXTREMADURA

20TH – 27TH March, 2014



OUR ACCOMMODATION AT EL RECUERDO

The latest Team of Vicky & Campbell McLellan, Jane & Peter Freshwater, Morag King and Lesley Dron met up at the Easyjet check-in desk at Edinburgh airport at 1030 am on Thursday the 20th of March in preparation for our trip out to Extremadura. The flight was delayed for an hour owing to industrial action by French traffic controllers but time was caught up, and we arrived in Terminal I at the Bajas airport in Madrid at 5.05 pm instead of 4.30 pm. It was extremely good of our captain to speak to us personally about the delay.

We met up with our host and guide, Martin Kelsey, before he and I headed off for the Enterprise Car Hire to pick up the very spacious Citroen Jumper. Martin skilfully negotiated the Madrid traffic, and we arrived at El Recuerdo at 9.15 pm, after spotting **Wood Pigeons, Collared Doves, Common Kestrel, Common Magpies, Azure-winged Magpies, Spotless Starlings, White Storks** and very probably a party of **Common Cranes** sighted by Morag en route.

As we pulled in at our Casa Rural, a **Scops Owl** was quite vocal. We were met by Claudia with Moro the dog, and before too long, we were in our very comfortable rooms before starting to eat at 9.30 pm. An early night was called for.

There was early morning mist as we went for our 8 am breakfasts on Friday the 21st of March prior to heading south to the rice-fields with Martin at 9.15 am. At an early stop, Lesley spotted a party of 9 **Common Cranes**, remnants of over 130,000, which winter here! In this area, we also noted **Cattle Egrets**, **White Storks**, **Black Kites**, **Common Buzzard**, **Common Kestrel**, **Hen Harrier**, **Merlin**, a fast high-flying **Black-bellied Sand-grouse**, **Hoopoe**, **Crested Larks**, **Meadow Pipits**, **Stonechats**, **Fan-tailed Warblers** (zitters), **Southern Grey Shrike**, **Raven**, **Spotless Starlings**, **House Sparrows**, **Spanish Sparrows**, **Tree Sparrows**, **Goldfinches** and the ubiquitous **Corn Bunting**.

During our travels to the rice-fields proper as the mist lifted and the temps rose from 9 degrees to around 15, we even came across a 'bouquet' of 21 **Great Bustards**. The rice-fields were very productive, and we noted **Little Egrets**, **Grey Heron**, **Mallards**, **Marsh Harriers**, 30 **Little Ringed Plovers**, a **Lapwing**, 3 **Dunlins**, one **Little Stint**, a **Temminck's Stint**, 12 **Common Snipe**, a **Common Redshank**, several **Green Sandpipers**, 17 **Ruff**, **Meadow Pipits**, several **Water Pipits**, a **Yellow Wagtail**, and more **Fan-tailed Warblers**. Along the field ditches, we occasionally caught glimpses of the fleeing **Red Avadavats** and **Common Waxbills**.

It was now time for a coffee break; so, en route to the Crane Centre, we popped into a hotel. From here, we continued to the Crane Centre (closed for the season), and stopped at a very attractive lake by the roadside to observe **Mallards**, **Moorhens**, **Little Egrets**, **Great Egret** and 6 **Spoonbills**. We could hear a **Cuckoo** calling.

It was now lunchtime; so we ensconced ourselves at a picnic table. From here, we went for a walk to a tall tower hide, and with the sun now starting to shine and the temps at around 21 degrees, the Barbary Nuts opened out, and a few butterflies took to the wing - **Small Heath**, **Small White**, **Small Copper**, **Speckled Wood**, **Clouded Yellow**, **Western Dappled White**, **Red Admiral** and probably **Large Tortoiseshell**. We even watched a couple of **Hummingbird Hawk-moths** and a dragonfly. The flowers were excellent with Martin finding some **Sawfly** and **Green-winged Orchids** for us as well as **Yellow Anemone** and a **Common Tree Frog**.

Most of the Team walked back to the picnic tables but I took the minibus up to the hide for those who wished a lift. Whilst in the tower hide, a couple of **Kentish Plovers**, a **Swallowtail** and three more **Common Cranes** were noted. All that remained now was to head back to El Recuerdo to get ready for another fine meal produced by Claudia. The local **Scops Owls** were performing again along with **Little Owls**, and our bird list, conducted in the warm comfort of the log-fired lounge, stood at 71 species.

Martin was with us again on Saturday the 22nd as we headed out on the road to Santa Marta de Magasca. There had been quite a bit of rain through the night with early mist, which cleared quickly to produce a fairly sunny day with a chilly wind. The temps ranged from 9 - 16th degrees C.

At our first stop, we watched a **Little Bustard** on the ground, and a **Great Bustard** in flight whilst **Thekla Larks** sang and landed on fence posts. A **Southern Grey Shrike** was perched on an adjacent tree, and **Black Vultures** were spotted along with the much commoner **Griffons**. An ex-RSPB colleague, Chris Durdin, arrived in a smaller minibus with a group of HoneyGuide clients.

At the second stop, a little further up the hill, another 'bouquet' of 10 **Great Bustards** was sighted along with a light-coloured **Buzzard**, and we had distant views of 12 **Pin-tailed Sand-grouse**. Next, we drove down a track to spot **Red Kites**, **Calandra Larks**, another **Southern Grey Shrike** and two fairly distant **Little Owls** (wee Hoolets), one on an outcrop of rocks, and the other on a building.

When we reached the village of Santa Marta de Magasca, we drove downhill and stopped to look over a river valley where we spotted French Lavender, **Red-rumped Swallows**, **Chaffinches**, **Booted Eagle**, **Short-toed Eagle** and Large Psammodromus Lizards (i.e. Sam O'Dramus from Belfast, the Whiskey taster).



THE LARGE PSAMMODROMUS LIZARD

Our next stop on the way to the embalse at Talavan was at a road junction by a pond containing Stripe-necked Terrapins and a pair of **Gadwall**. There were numerous nest boxes for Rollers on telegraph poles but these boxes were being used instead by **Jackdaws**, **Lesser Kestrels** and **Spotless Starlings**. In this area, we also noted 30 **Great Bustards** and a few **Red Kites** plus more **Black & Griffon Vultures**.

It was cool and breezy when we reached our lunching spot at the Talavan embalse but a few stalwarts decided to eat alfresco (whoever he is). During our picnic lunch, Martin spotted a **Golden Eagle** overhead, and we relocated it later. We had a walk along the bank of this reservoir, spotting **Little Grebes**, **Great Crested Grebes**, **Cormorant**, **Little Egret**, **Great Egret**, **Grey Heron**, **White Stork**, **Mallard**, **Moorhens** and **Coots** before finding a Centipede devouring a grub. We all admired the swathes of White Broom as well as Undulate Anchusa and the carpets of the greyish Paronychia. We managed to record a few butterflies - Clouded Yellow, Small Heath, Small Copper, Western Dappled White and the beautiful Spanish Festoon.

We continued through the small village of Monroy, and on towards Trujillo, spotting the odd **Woodchat** en route, and at a vantage spot, we also watched two female **Montagu's Harriers** and a **Short-toed Eagle**.

Our last stop was at a road and track junction where we went for a walk after spotting a **Little Owl** on an adjacent ruin. We came across another two **Little Bustards**

and a small frog as well as plenty of **Calandra Larks**. We were back at base at 6.20 pm with plenty of time to get ready before another lovely 7.30 pm dinner from Claudia. Our bird list now stands at 95 bird species.

It was a very pleasant day on Sunday the 23rd with 18 degrees C, a slight breeze and plenty of sunshine. I normally have the local walk on the very first day but owing to Martin's commitments, we had left it until today. This worked out really well as the first morning was damp and misty with the weather this morning being excellent. We strolled along the green, leafy country lanes in a loop, spotting Iberian Hares, **Collared Doves**, **Hoopoe**, **Red-rumped Swallows**, **Swallows**, **Wren**, **Black Redstart**, **Blackbird**, **Song Thrush**, **Sardinian Warbler**, **Blackcaps**, **Chiffchaffs**, **Long-tailed Tits**, **Blue Tits**, **Great Tits**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Woodchat**, **Azure-winged Magpies**, **Spotless Starlings**, **House Sparrows**, **Spanish Sparrows**, **Serins**, **Greenfinches**, **Goldfinches**, **Linnets** and last but by no means least the wonderful party of **Hawfinches** feeding on the seeds of the Southern Elm. The 'yaffling' of a **Green Woodpecker** could be discerned, and we also noted Wall Browns, Speckled Woods and a possible Green Hairstreak as well as a couple of Hummingbird Hawk-moths.

It was even warm enough to sit outside in the El Recuerdo courtyard to have another of our bountiful picnic lunches. After this, we headed out in the Citroen towards Trujillo, spotting two **Black-winged Stilts** at our local pond, before branching off for Belen. We drove slowly along the pot-holed road, stopping every now and then for a scan, spotting **Lesser Kestrels**, **Booted Eagles**, **Short-toed Eagles**, **Griffon & Black Vultures**, the very common **Black Kites**, **Red Kite**, **Marsh Harriers**, **Hoopoe**, **4 Northern Wheatears**, **Calandra Larks**, **Thekla Larks**, **Crested Larks**, **Meadow Pipits**, **Ravens**, **Stonechats** and oodles of **Corn Buntings**. We parked the vehicle on a track at the highest point of the plain and went for a short walk but did not add anything new. The odd Clouded Yellow, Small Heath and Western Dappled White butterfly was on the wing, and we added two Painted Ladies along the roadside.

After this, we drove a little further along the road, and stopped to look over a **White Stork** nesting area beside a pond, which contained a pair of **Teal** and a pair of **Gadwall**. At this juncture, we met up with Chris Durdin again who had just been to a lake called Tozo, and had seen several species not yet on our list! We turned around at a ruined farm but not before Vicky had found a beautiful close **Little Owl** for us. We were a little bit later in getting back than I had planned but we still had enough time to prepare for another fine meal.

Tonight was the night that Real Madrid was playing hot rivals Barcelona, and the Kelsey family plus myself went down to the local pub in Pago de San Clemente to watch the match on a wide screen. For the neutral, it was a very exciting game but for the locals it was a bit of a heartbreak as Barca won 4-3. Our bird list jumped to a very healthy 103.

On Monday the 24th, it was my turn again to entertain the troops; so on a bright but cool day, we headed down through Zorita and onto the Campo Lugar road after having a quick stop just outside Zorita. There was little to report here apart from the usual **Crested Larks**, **Stonechats**, **Spotless Starlings**, **Corn Buntings**, **Common Kestrel** and **Serins**.

We fared better along the Campo Lugar road, and, at our first stop, spotted 4 **Little Bustards**, several **Great Bustards**, **Marsh Harriers** and a **Little Owl** after a joint effort between Lesley & Jane. We pulled in at a convenient lay-by, and were delighted when Peter spotted "a grouse-like bird" which turned into a party of 10 feeding **Black-**

bellied Sand-grouse (or should that be Sand-bellied Black Grouse)? We also observed **Red Kite**, a flock of around **50 Black-headed Gulls** and **2 Red-legged Partridges** before Lesley and I spotted a **Black-eared Wheatear** on a fence. Unfortunately, this bird flew behind us and was never found again.

It was now approaching lunchtime; so we headed to the Embalse de Sierra Brava where we watched around **200 Shovelers**, **20 Great Crested Grebes**, **30 Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and **3 Cormorants** before having lunch in the minibus to keep out of the chilly wind. We also noted **Northern Wheatear**, **Ravens** and nesting **Lesser Kestrels**.

Martin had given us a location for **Stone Curlews** but in the area mentioned, we only saw grazing sheep with lambs and **Iberian Hares**. Jane tried to contact Martin by mobile to ask for more exact instructions, and left a message.

Our next port of call was the Mayve café on the outskirts of Madrigalajo where we enjoyed a coffee. When we popped out again, the rain had started to fall. We drove along the road to the new power station, spotting **4 Little Grebes**, **Cattle Egrets**, **Little Egrets**, **Grey Herons**, **Mallards**, **20 Moorhens**, **Coot** and **White Storks**. With the rain falling, the **Common Buzzards** and **Black Kites** were utilising the tops of telegraph poles.

We pulled off the tarmac road and onto a side track where we went for a short walk. **Cetti's** and **Fan-tailed Warblers** could be heard as well as a **Quail**, and **Wood pigeons** and **Collared Doves** were quite evident. Lesley spotted a hunting male **Hen Harrier** before the rain became quite heavy and we retreated to the vehicle. With no respite in sight, we drove back along the same road as we came, and stopped once more at the water area where we added **Yellow Wagtail**, **Green Sandpiper** and **Little Ringed Plover**.

We decided to have a second look for the **Stone Curlews**; so off we went to the Sierra Brava reservoir once more, and this time we were successful in seeing two birds. Lesley even added a **Common Sandpiper** along the edge of the water.

We arrived back early at 5.30 pm, and checked to see if the **Stripe-less Tree Frogs** were still in the large pitcher by the front door. As it started to clear up, I decided to go for a local walk and came across **Common Cuckoo**, **Great Spotted Cuckoo** and singing **Woodlark**. Another grand meal was devoured, and we nestled into the warmth of the lounge to do our bird list, which now stands at 112 species. Some of us popped out to listen to the **Scops Owls** once again.

Because I had seen the **Great Spotted Cuckoo** yesterday, I suggested to the Team that we could have a pre-breakfast walk on Tuesday the 25th. Most of us were out in a chilly breeze once again but joined by Heather & Liz who were also staying at El Recuerdo. We were lucky, as the bird was still around and vocal, and we also heard **Common Cuckoo**, **Hoopoe** and **Short-toed Treecreeper** but best of all, we watched a drumming **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**!

Breakfast tasted even better after that. The temps started at 7 and rose to 15 degrees C today with quite a lot of sunshine. It was Martin's turn to take us out, and we firstly visited a new area for me, which was a **White Broom scrub** area followed by a walk through a **Cork Oak woodland**. **Thekla Larks** were singing as **Southern Grey Shrikes** sat on telephone wires, and the birds we were really looking for appeared - **Dartford Warblers**! Just before entering the woodland, we bumped into Jules with a group. I had met him before at El Recuerdo and also in the Picos de Europa.



LOOKING FOR NUTHATCHES IN THE CORK OAK WOODLAND

We also came across a spiral of around 100 **Griffon Vultures** with the odd **Black** one mixed in as well as a pair of **Short-toed Eagles** and a **Sparrowhawk**. In the woodland itself, we heard **Nuthatches** and saw **Woodpigeons**, **Short-toed Treecreepers**, **Long-tailed Tits** and **Wren**. By the river, a small dog came bounding out to meet us, and made us most welcome. Martin also showed us several **Angels'-tears Narcissus**, and in the sunshine we added **Small Heaths**, **Western Dappled Whites** and a possible **Green Hairstreak**. On the way back to the Citroen, some of us spotted a couple of **Red Deer**.

From here, we went for a bridge stop where a cattle herder disturbed some feeding **Griffon Vultures**, and we also noted **Sardinian Warbler** and **Serins** whilst Martin caught sight of another **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**. Next, it was time for a café coffee break followed by lunch by a small fire station amongst the **Eucalyptus** trees. We made use of the wooden picnic tables although the gusts of wind were quite strong at times. After this, we went for a short local walk with Martin hearing **Crested Tits**, and the rest of us seeing another **Short-toed Eagle**, a female **Cirl Bunting**, a male **Subalpine Warbler** and a **Spanish Festoon** butterfly. From this elevated spot, we had a very good view over to the **Arrocampo Embalse**. As we were making our way back to the minibus, a **Woodlark** with food in its beak alighted on a telephone wire.

The original plan was to head to the foothills of the local mountains but owing to the strength of the wind, Martin decided to take us to the more sheltered **Tozo Embalse** of which Chris Durdin had spoken. This turned out to be a very good decision as apart from the birds, we noted **Jonquil** and **Hoop-petticoat Narcissi** plus **Conical Orchid**.

We could hide ourselves behind some oak trees as we watched **Little Grebes**, **Great Crested Grebes**, **Cormorants**, **Little Egrets**, **Great Egret**, **Grey Herons**, 2

Egyptian Geese, 10 Wigeon, 40 Gadwall, 40 Mallard, 4 Pintail, 30 Shovelers, 40 Teal, 12 Black-winged Stilts, 3 Little Ringed Plovers, 6 Lapwings, Common Snipe, 2 Spotted Redshanks, 2 Greenshanks, 4 Green Sandpipers and a Common Sandpiper.

Our wonderful bird-watching day was not yet over as we still had time to visit the main square in Trujillo where we went for coffees followed by a bit of sight-seeing plus watching out for **Lesser Kestrels** and **Pallid Swifts**. We even had time to visit the local bullring where more **Lesser Kestrels** were nesting, and we had absolutely excellent views of these birds as well as the nesting **Spotless Starlings**.

We were back at El Recuerdo at 6.20 pm allowing over an hour to get ready for our dinner followed by our bird list meeting in the cosy lounge where we noted that our list had shot up to 126 species.

It was my turn again to take the Team out on a very bright and sunny Wednesday the 26th of March. We had left the wonderful visit to the National Park of Monfrague until the final full day, and although it was a bit cool at times, the temps rose to 18 degrees C.

Our first stop was at a bridge over the Almonte river where we noted **Crag Martins, House Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, White Wagtail, Corn Buntings, Stonechats** and an over-flying **Golden Eagle** identified by Lesley.

The castle was next on the cards, and here we had excellent views of **Griffon & Black Vultures, 3 Egyptian Vultures, Crag Martins, Rock Buntings, Black Redstarts, 4 Hawfinches, Blackcaps** and, perhaps best of all, a pair of **Choughs**.

The next stop was just beyond the bridge where several hundred pairs of **House Martins** were nesting along with **Feral Pigeons**. We also added **Cormorants** and two more **Egyptian Vultures**. Now it was time for lunch; so we headed towards the conservation village of Villa Real de San Carlos where we ensconced ourselves at some very solid picnic tables. Most of Lesley's lunch-break was taken up with the search for Bonelli's Eagles. We did not see them but spotted **Short-toed Eagle** and **Crested Larks**.

From here, we moved on to the famous site for nesting **Eagle Owl**, and very luckily indeed, some 36 hours previously, Martin had learned just where the pair was nesting! Also, at last night's evening meal, another guest had shown me on his camera just where the nest was. This made the bird quite easy to find but before that, Lesley had gone ahead and had spotted a **Spanish Imperial Eagle** just as the rest of us were pointing out a flying **Black Stork**! We all managed to see both of these very good species as well as **Blue Rock Thrushes** and more **Egyptian Vultures**.

En route to a conifer plantation site, a couple of Foxes crossed the road in front of us. There was not too much to be seen at the woodland spot apart from **Speckled Woods, a Clouded Yellow** and more **Western Dappled Whites**.

We decided to stop once more at the bridge where the **House Martins** were nesting in the hope of spotting a Bonelli's Eagle but again without success although by this time the day had really warmed up.

Our last venue for the day was at the Pena Falcon site where **Vultures** and **Black Storks** nest, and here, apart from these birds, we added 2 **Peregrines**, two more **Blue Rock Thrushes** and two more **Egyptian Vultures**.

After another wonderful day out, we were back at our Casa Rural at 6.20 once again to enjoy another fine meal followed by our bird list meeting. The total is now 133.



BIRDWATCHING AT ARROCAMPO

Very luckily for this Team, the flight back to Edinburgh did not leave until 5 pm which allowed a whole morning for more bird and plant watching. So on Thursday the 27th of March we said our farewells to Claudia, Yolanda and Moro at 0910 and set off for the Arrocampo Embalse. We firstly drove past the entrance and down a road at the back of Saucedilla where Lesley found one of her favourite birds - a **Black-shouldered Kite**, and later a second bird was spotted. **Cetti's Warblers** were calling from nearby. We returned and parked at the entrance, and very soon we were watching **Little Bitterns**, **Purple Herons**, **Purple Gallinules**, **Fan-tailed Warblers** and **Savi's Warbler** as well as hearing **Sedge** and **Reed Warblers**.

As it was a very clement day, we did not require the use of the hides but made use of their elevated ramps for a scan around, spotting **Great Crested Grebes**, **Cormorant**, **Cattle Egrets**, **Little Egret**, **Great Egret**, **Grey Herons**, **White Storks**, **Spoonbill**, **Gadwall**, **Mallards**, **Marsh Harriers**, **Booted Eagles**, **Moorhens**, **Coots**, **Black-headed Gulls**, hundreds of **Sand Martins**, **Swallows**, **Red-rumped Swallows**, **Meadow Pipits**, **2 Tree Pipits** and **White Wagtails**.

We still had another venue to visit before returning to Madrid, and this was a very special site for orchids. We attempted to have our lunch whilst looking at **Conical**, **Naked Man**, **Champagne**, **Yellow Bee**, **Early Spider**, **Mirror**, **Sawfly** and **Woodcock Orchids**. Some of us caught up on a **Swallowtail** butterfly before heading up the motorway. We made one more stop at a café before reaching the airport at 3.15 pm. The Team was checked in very quickly, and Martin and I said our farewells before heading for another coffee to await the arrival of the second group.

This holiday has been very good as always with the weather being quite sunny but cold at times. The Team total of 143 bird species was very acceptable plus the 13 types

of butterflies, 4 mammals and lots of lovely flowers. The accommodation of El Recuerdo and the hospitality of Martin & Claudia are second to none, and I hope we will all be back there again before too long.

Russell G Nisbet - April, 2014



SAWFLY ORCHID