

## Extremadura, Spain 21 – 28 April 2018 with Shetland Wildlife

Leaders: Judd Hunt and Martin Kelsey OBE

### **Saturday 21 April:**

After the group assembled at Gatwick airport, we boarded our short flight down to Madrid where we met Martin, my co-guide for the week. In no time, we were on our way out of Madrid and heading south-west towards Extremadura.

A short stop 90 minutes into the journey allowed us to enjoy our first good views of a few species that aren't normally seen in the U.K. with Crested Larks running around the car park and a gorgeous pale morph Booted Eagle overhead.

Another hour saw us arrive at our base for the week; the beautiful Casa El Recuerdo in the small rural village of Pago de San Clemente just a few kilometres south of the famous town of Trujillo. This guesthouse, which is set amid beautiful gardens, olive groves and orchards is run by Martin and his wife Claudia.

Each year, Martin and I study the weather forecast for the forthcoming week and then every evening we plan the itinerary for the following day. This allows us to maximise our chances of seeing the greatest diversity of wildlife. This year, we needn't have worried as, apart from an isolated heavy shower on Sunday, the weather was warm, dry and sunny throughout the week!

### **Sunday 22 April:**

Following breakfast (where I rediscovered my love of Marmite!), we set off to explore the area of plains that stretch out west from Trujillo towards Caceres and surrounding the town of Santa Marta de Magasca.

Our first stop, just off the roadside produced some amazing sightings and we had great views of a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse as they flew overhead. We also saw a "quartering" male Montague's Harrier as he searched for prey in the short grass and both Black and Red Kites were seen from the same vantage point. We studied a few nearby larks and

described the salient features used to separate Crested from Thekla and then heard the rasping, raspberry-like call of a Little Bustard. With some searching, we eventually found him on an adjacent grassy slope where he revealed his lovely black and white neck patterns as he slowly walked through the swaying grass fronds. However, he was dwarfed in comparison as we later saw 3 huge Great Bustards - the males being the heaviest flying birds on the planet!

Many chunky, stout-billed Calandra Larks were watched as they delivered their mimicry-ridden songs both in flight and from fence posts plus two fly-by Golden Orioles were seen by most.

We saw twittering flocks of Spanish Sparrows as they fed in a cattle pen and Corn Buntings were literally everywhere! We saw a Tawny Pipit in this area and this proved to be the only sighting of the trip – a sign that some migrants were late to arrive back due to the recent poor weather. We also saw a few “Iberian” Yellow Wagtails and migrant Whinchats, Northern Wheatears, Subalpine Warblers and Common Whitethroats as they refuelled before their journeys northwards.

This year was experiencing a “late spring” and the landscape was showing the benefits of some recent, prolonged rainfall. The grasses were still lush and verdant whereas in previous years, they had already begun to look scorched and golden-brown. This also encouraged an amazing bloom of flowers with the blood-red of Poppies helping to create a riot of colour all across the grasslands. Along an ancient drover’s track we found a few “spikes” of Heart-flowered Tongue Orchids as well as some Red-striped Oil Beetles.

As the sun rose higher so did the temperature and we were soon thrilled to see vultures climbing high on the forming thermals. During the day we saw an estimated 100 huge Griffon and 15 even mightier Black Vultures and some of the views as they circled overhead were awesome!

It didn’t take long for us to see our first shrikes and we had great views of both Iberian Grey and Woodchats sat atop bushes and fence posts.

After a coffee stop, we searched for Rollers and soon found a few pairs of this stunning bird as they performed their “rolling” displays and while hunting for insects.

We also added another gaudy species as we saw a few Bee-eaters dashing past, apparently still migrating to destinations further north. It is estimated that there may be as many as one million Bee-eaters that stay

and breed in Extremadura but being common certainly doesn't diminish their beauty!

Throughout the day, we saw many Hoopoes which, along with both Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles and Rollers, gave a real tropical feel to the birds we had seen!

A Little Owl seemed to have exercised "Squatter's Rights" as it sat in the entrance to a purpose-built Roller nest box and we also saw a few Lesser Kestrels as they hunted over the nearby fields.

We saw a few White Storks throughout the day (many hundreds over the course of the week!); some joining "kettles" of soaring vultures while others strode purposefully through fields and grasslands as they fed on frogs, grasshoppers and other invertebrates.

We took lunch at a site alongside the Rio Magasca and here we were treated to some fantastic views of both Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows as they hawked insects over the river. A Cirl Bunting sang on an adjacent hillside and eventually gave us views as he flew over the river valley and on to the opposite hillside.

To add to today's lark-fest, we watched a Woodlark delivering his beautiful, fluty song-flight until he eventually dropped and disappeared from view.

We began to see more raptors as the warmth of the afternoon increased and in an amazing thirty minute spell we had good views of 1 Golden, 2 Bonelli's, 2 Booted and 3 Short-toed Eagles – wow!

A few Sardinian Warbler's played "hard-to-get" but everyone eventually managed views and then we watched a migrant Common Sandpiper as it fed along a muddy margin, bobbing its rear-end in typical fashion.

We returned to the Guesthouse and, before dinner, we watched Spotless Starlings, Serins and beautiful Azure-winged Magpies but the star of the show was the Nightingale that had set-up territory in the garden for another year.

We enjoyed a fabulous meal cooked by Claudia and Martin (a common theme throughout our stay) and we learned that all the produce used was either grown by our hosts or sourced locally. Before retiring to bed, we reflected on the superb days wildlife-watching we had experienced.

## **Monday 23 April:**

Today we headed south and our first destination were the plains near Campo Lugar. We stopped several times along the quiet road there, taking gentle strolls on each occasion.

The first birds we spotted were groups of massive male Great Bustards who were performing their wonderful “turning inside out” displays as they strode around in unison. A couple of female birds could be seen nearby but, to my eyes at least, they looked quite unimpressed and seemed more intent of feeding! To see these bustards still displaying at the end of April is quite unusual but, again, the “late spring” was probably responsible for this.

A distant Little Bustard was also seen but we were quickly distracted by a Golden Eagle that flew overhead, affording us super views as it did so. Other birds of prey were also noted and a lovely Marsh Harrier was seen quartering over a near crop field. Lesser Kestrels were watched as they hovered, showing their characteristic silvery underwings as they searched for food. Vultures began to soar overhead and we were treated to incredible views of both Griffon and Blacks as we strolled along the road.

We listened to a Quail calling and the songs of many Calandra Larks all around us plus the seemingly always prevalent jingling sound of Corn Buntings. Five Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew past giving great views in the beautiful light conditions and uttering their bubbling calls.

At our last stop in this area, we were treated to good views of a melanistic Montague’s Harrier patrolling the fields either side of the road plus amazing views of a pair of Rollers. A pair of Red-legged Partridges were seen but we failed to find any Stone Curlews here.

We then drove the short distance to Sierra Brava reservoir where we stopped at several points along the embankment. Great views of Crag Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, Bee-eaters and Lesser Kestrels were obtained plus we saw a few graceful Gull-billed Terns as they flew over the dam.

The recently created Alcollarin Reservoir was our final destination of the day and we spent the majority of the afternoon here.

While eating lunch at a lovely picnic site which overlooks the two bodies of water here we saw a migrant Willow Warbler as it fed high in the oak trees above us. We spotted a few Great Egrets, dwarfing the nearby Little Egrets plus we saw a Purple Heron with its snake-like neck hunting fish in the margins.

A Greater Flamingo was watched as it paddled in the shallows while above it we saw both Black and Whiskered Terns hawking for insects on the water's surface.

After lunch we drove around the reservoir, stopping at various vantage points to scan the reservoir eventually arriving at one of Martin's favourite spots on the southern edge.

There were many birds on view here and we eventually found a dapper drake Ring-necked Duck that had been present for a few days. This North American vagrant has seen an upsurge in records of the past decade but it was a new bird in Spain for Judd!

2 Spoonbills were present plus the waterfowl were well represented with Gadwall, Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Greylag Goose all present. We also saw a Glossy Ibis here plus Little, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, all in their fine summer dress.

A few migrant waders were seen and we spotted Black-winged Stilts, Redshanks, Greenshanks and Common Sandpipers on the shoreline while more Black and Whiskered Terns elegantly fed over the water.

Following another fabulous dinner, we headed out for a stroll and had great views of Azure-winged Magpies as they moved through the Olive and Oak trees in their follow-my-leader fashion. We also saw a stunning male Black Redstart, had good views of Sardinian Warblers and heard Short-toed Treecreepers but failed to find any Red-necked Nightjars.

## **Tuesday 24 April:**

After breakfast, we headed south and arrived at the reservoir near Alange.

The dam here holds the biggest colony of Alpine Swifts in Extremadura and the views one can obtain from the footpath which runs along the top are quite spectacular! We watched as they sped past in lines, much like the behaviour of the smaller Common Swifts, as males chased females

whilst uttering their chattering calls. Successful pursuits ended with birds mating on the wing and many attempts at capturing this with cameras resulting with mixed fortunes!

After wrestling Judd away, our group took a stroll around the edge of the reservoir and almost immediately we'd found two of the main targets here; stunning male Black Wheatear and Rock Buntings, both singing their hearts out – fantastic!

Thekla Larks gave amazing views along the track and were occasionally seen as they rose above us to treat us to their lovely song-flights while Serins and Goldfinches were seen flying by and perched in tree tops. Huge Griffon Vultures soared above the rocky outcrops while Common Kestrels and Crag Martins patrolled the ridge.

It soon became apparent that there had been a considerable fall of migrants as we started seeing good numbers of Willow and Bonelli's Warblers plus a couple of male nominate Pied Flycatchers. A single Reed Warbler was spotted before we found a beautiful Wood Warbler which was only the second record for Extremadura and a new bird in the region for Martin! Judd enjoyed showing this to Martin, the second successive year he's been able to do so after last year's surprise, vagrant Blue-cheeked Bee-eater.

As we scanned the rocky crags, an Eagle Owl took flight and perched out in full view allowing prolonged 'scope views giving stunning views – wow! This sighting was a real bonus and saved searching for the species again later in the week.

Over the water we saw Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls whilst Gull-billed Terns regularly flew past us along the shoreline. Another male Black Wheatear and a few Blue Rock Thrushes were seen before we departed and this ended a brilliant few hours birding at this great location.

We headed back north and stopped to take lunch in Merida, the capital city of Extremadura. We chose a picnic site adjacent to the ancient Roman bridge which spans the Rio Guadiana and again we saw evidence of a recent fall of migrants with more Pied Flycatchers, a Common Redstart, Willow, Bonelli's and a single Melodious Warbler being seen.

We then moved onto the bridge to and were soon watching 3 species of swifts flying overhead and at eye level. Alpines, Pallids and Commons

all gave great views and the differences between the very similar Common and Pallid were pointed out.

Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis and a Spoonbill were seen flying along the course of the river and a couple of Night Herons were seen roosting deep in cover then a stunning Little Bittern was watched as it searched for prey at the water's edge below us and eventually the group managed views of a beautiful little Penduline Tit as it gathered nesting material from the reed mace. A gaudy Purple Swamphen was well watched but a fly-by Golden Oriole was less obliging!

On the way back to base, stopped at the Santa Amalia rice fields. Here we were treated to the aerial acrobatics of a group of lovely Collared Pratincoles as they hunted insects over the fields. A few Hoopoes, Bee-eaters and Rollers showed off while Short-toed Larks were watched on the ground and in song flight. We also found the only Tree Sparrows of the trip plus a few migrant Ringed Plovers and assumed breeding Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers. As we were leaving in the vehicles, we flushed two Stone Curlews that had been sat near the edge of a dry rice paddy but they quickly settled allowing superb views through our telescopes.

### **Weds 25 April:**

Today we headed north to spend the day inside the famous Monfrague National Park. We decided to drive straight to the furthest point (as it would be quieter) and then move slowly back through the park, stopping at the best locations.

As we drove through the park we saw a few Alpine Swifts sweeping past and stopped briefly to see a stunning male Black-eared Wheatear sat atop a road sign.

We parked-up near Portilla del Tietar which is a known breeding site for the endangered Spanish Imperial Eagle. While waiting, we had brilliant views as Griffon Vultures drifted overhead before lowering their legs to act as air brakes before landing on the cliff face opposite. A couple of splendid Short-toed Eagles were watched soaring and a few Subalpine Warblers and Rock Buntings were seen and heard in the habitat around us.

Soon after, the Spanish Imperial Eagle was spotted as it alighted on a dead tree on the side of the rocky pinnacle and the views through the telescope were breath-taking! Over the following ninety minutes, both adults put in regular appearances as they soared overhead or perched on the same dead tree opposite us.

To recover from the excitement, we drove a short distance to the nearby café where we all enjoyed our refreshments. Leaving the vehicles in the car park, we took a gentle stroll along the quiet road and began to get great views of a good selection of birds; Woodchat Shrikes perched in the shade of the trees, Azure-winged Magpies fed on the ground and Bee-eaters flew above us.

We then heard the song of a close Orphean Warbler and zoned-in on the tree he was perched in. With some patience, everyone enjoyed good views of this large warbler as he flew between trees and occasionally sat out in full view. A few Golden Orioles were heard singing and calling with most of the group getting views of the birds in flight and occasionally perched in trees. Overhead, we again saw one of the local pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles along with Booted Eagles and Black Kites.

As we moved back through the park, we stopped at a nest site for Egyptian Vulture and, sure enough, one of the adults was sat tight, incubating its clutch on a rocky shelf across the water. Over the following few hours, we saw several of these (comparatively) small, delicate vultures as they patrolled the skies.

After lunch, we walked a short distance and soon found a pair of gorgeous little Crested Tits as they busily went about their business in the conifer trees above us. We had good views of Serins here but again, Golden Orioles only gave tantalising views to some.

Next we stopped at a layby overlooking another craggy rock-face and almost immediately we were greeted by a Bonelli's Eagle above us. It afforded good views as it rode a thermal and several Griffon and Black Vultures were doing likewise. More Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers were seen here, some undertaking their tail-jerking, towering song-flights and a clandestine Golden Oriole sang invisibly in the trees below us.

The final stop of the day was at the well-known site of Pena Falcon – literally translated as “Falcon Rock”. In no time at all, the reason for the naming of the rock became apparent as a Peregrine appeared periodically around the crags. Above and around us there were Red-



rumped Swallows, Crag Martins and Black Redstarts everywhere and several beautiful male Blue Rock Thrushes were watched as they delivered their charming songs.

Pena Falcon is home to over a hundred pairs of Griffon Vultures and the views as they flew just a hundred feet or so above us were incredible. Unfortunately, the cold late spring had taken its toll and many of the vulture nests had failed this year.

Black Storks also nest here and we saw at least eight of these prehistoric looking birds as they glided past with some landing on the rocks opposite us and giving amazing views.

All too soon, it was time to return to our Guesthouse where, after dinner, we set out on our evening stroll. Although we took pre-breakfast and evening walks most days, this was by far the most productive. Firstly, we saw a Spotted Flycatcher which proved the only sighting during our stay and then found 6 Rock Sparrows which showed well on the edge of the village we were staying in. The highlight however were the wonderful views that we had at dusk of a male Red-necked Nightjar as it hunted moths over the path we were walking along. We'd looked for this species several times already, but this was the first sign that they were arriving back a bit later than usual from their wintering quarters in deepest Africa.

#### **Thursday 26 April:**

Following breakfast, we drove for about 20 minutes back toward Madrid and stopped at the superb heathland habitat near Jaraicejo.

On this still warm morning, the sound of the countless bees as they gathered pollen and nectar from the lavender was mesmerising. The songs of the local Dartford Warblers and Thekla Larks added to atmosphere with the larks easy to see but the warblers less so!

However, with perseverance and keen eyes, we all eventually had good views of this handsome little warbler as the show-off males delivered their scratchy songs from bush-tops and in flight. We then heard the song of Spectacled Warbler and over the following ten minutes, everyone managed good 'scope views of him singing from a tangle of dead twigs.

With Black Vultures, Booted and Short-toed Eagles overhead we strolled down through an oak woodland and into a small river valley. As we

passed through the wood everyone managed good views of Short-toed Treecreepers and, at last, Golden Orioles! Several males were in hot pursuit of the less brightly coloured females they occasionally sat out on branches underhanging the trees' canopies. We found a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which showed well and everyone in the group was elated to this delightful bird which is sadly, so hard to find in the UK nowadays.

On the way back to our vehicles, we had amazing views of a Spanish Imperial Eagle as it soared right over us for what seemed like an age! More Thekla Larks and Dartford Warblers were seen before we set off on the short journey to our first "comfort stop".

After coffee, tea, coke and lemonade we headed on for another twenty minutes until we reached the large wetlands that lay to the north of the town of Almaraz. The area is known as Arrocampo and our first stop was just to the south of the village of Saucedilla. Lesser Kestrels were seen hunting over the town and outlying fields and a Red Kite was spotted drifting over a small copse.

Over the following few hours and at various points around these wetlands we saw an impressive selection of birds. Purple Swamphens and Little Bitterns, Squacco and Purple Herons, Penduline Tit, hundreds of White Storks and Cattle Egrets, Spoonbills, Gull-billed Terns, Hoopoes, Bee-eaters, Zitting Cisticolas, Reed, Great Reed and Savi's Warblers and Black-winged Stilts were the highlights with the seemingly ever present eclectic mix of raptors overhead – what an amazing place!

Feeling extremely satisfied with the incredible array of species we'd encountered today, it was time to head home for a well-earned dinner.

### **Friday 27 April:**

Our final full day saw us visit Arrocampo wetlands once again before we headed up into the Sierra de Gredos to search for some higher elevation species.

At Arrocampo, we had the opportunity to obtain better views of some of the species we'd encountered the previous afternoon and we achieved this with both Penduline Tit and Savi's Warbler.

The main reason for returning though was to search for Black-winged Kite. We managed some lovely views of Griffon and Black Vultures plus brilliant views of a Lesser Kestrel as it hovered right above us before we

spotted our target. First one then two of these dainty raptors for seen, both in flight and perched characteristically on the tops of trees and they remained still long enough for everyone to get views through the telescopes.

We left the area soon after and began our ascent into the mountains, stopping along the way for refreshments.

A few kilometres short of the village of Piornal, we stopped near a copse of conifers to take lunch. From this spot we saw Ravens and a superb Golden Eagle as it drifted effortlessly over the hillside.

After eating, we took the short walk up to the conifer trees and spent half an hour walking through and around the perimeter. Here we had good views of signing Firecrests, Bonelli's Warblers, Coal Tits and Short-toed Treecreepers while we saw both Woodlarks and Rock Buntings feeding on the ground. Another bird in evidence here were Dunnocks which, in the summer and like Coal Tits, are birds typically seen in the mountains and not the lowland garden birds that we experience in the UK.

Driving the short distance into the pretty town of Piornal, we stopped and spent some time watching Pallid Swifts as they screamed above us, some disappearing into crevices in the surrounding buildings where they nest. Like the Alpine Swifts seen a few days before, the photographers in the group achieved a mixed bag of results while attempting to capture a decent image of these rapid birds!

We then continued to drive up to the highest point that we would visit on this trip, to the point where the Provinces of Extremadura and Castilla de Leon meet at Tornavacas.

The main target species here was the Ortolan Bunting and after a little searching we managed to obtain great views of a pair. This delightful bunting is decreasing across large parts of its range but thankfully, it is still common within its range across Spain. The slightly brighter male occasionally uttered its melancholy, fluty song which seems to fit the mountain's ambience perfectly.

Before long, we called it a day as we had a fair distance to cover before arriving back to base but we all felt delighted to have seen such a variety of wonderful birds and in such varied habitats. We broke the journey by once again stopping at Pena Falcon within Monfrague. Again, we had stunning views of Griffon Vultures and Black Storks as they soared above and around the huge rocky pinnacle.

## **Saturday 28 April:**

How the week had flown by! It seemed like only a couple of days ago that we'd arrived but, after breakfast, we had to say goodbye to Claudia and the beautiful Guesthouse before embarking on the drive back to Madrid.

To break-up the journey, we stopped twice; the first time to look for orchids near to Almaraz and the second at a rest stop along the motorway. We had great success at the orchid site where, again due to the late spring, many species that have normally "gone over" by now were still in flower and we recorded Naked Man, Conical, Champagne, Yellow Bee, Woodcock and Mirror Orchids.

After arriving at Madrid airport, we all thanked Martin for his hospitality, for sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge and for his fabulous company before bidding him farewell. We boarded our flight back to Gatwick and once we'd collected our baggage, there was much hugging and exchanging of email addresses/phone numbers before we all went our separate ways home.