

Birding Extremadura and Casa Rural El Recuerdo

HOLIDAY REPORT FOR NORBERT AND ELKE



16th – 23rd November 2019 Itinerary

16th November 2019: Transfer from Lisbon to Casa Rural El Recuerdo and visit to Alcollarín Reservoir

17th November 2019: Plains west of Trujillo

18th November 2019: Bonelli's eagle Hide, Alcollarín Reservoir, Rice fields, Campo Lugar, Alcollarín

19th November 2019: Vulture Hide and Monfragüe National Park

20th November 2019: Trujillo, River Almonte, Belén Plains

21st November 2019: Guadalupe and Villuercas Mountains

22nd November 2019: Rice fields near Madrigalejo

23rd November 2019: Mérida and return to Lisbon

TRIP REPORT

16th November 2019: Transfer from Lisbon to Casa Rural El Recuerdo and visit to Alcollarín Reservoir

Martin picked up Norbert and Elke in downtown Lisbon at 11.00 and within just a few minutes we were crossing the Tagus River over the 25th April bridge heading south. It was a beautiful day, with clear sky and sunshine. **White Storks'** nests adorned pylons beside the motorway as we tracked across the coastal plain of Portugal before heading west and inland on higher ground, dominated by cork oak *dehesas* and then holm oaks as we got closer to the Spanish border. We stopped for a coffee just before the frontier and then once past Badajoz in Extremadura we stopped for a lunch at a motorway bar.

We reached Casa Rural El Recuerdo at 16.30 with time to settle-in before going out to catch the last hour of day light on the dam of the nearby Alcollarín reservoir. Here the objective was to watch and photograph the skeins of **Common Cranes** coming into roost and hundreds passed overhead towards the shore of the reservoir, whilst at the same time, groups of **Egyptian Geese** flew out to spend the night feeding on the fields.



Just before we left Elke spotted a large shape that landed on top of an oak tree: an **Eagle Owl**, a wonderful finale to the day.



17th November 2019: Plains west of Trujillo

As forecast, and in contrast to yesterday, the day dawned misty and as we set off it started to rain. Fortunately, the rain eased off until the end of the afternoon, but it remained heavily overcast all day.

We spent the day exploring the open plains to the west of Trujillo, travelling as far as Cáceres. At our first stop, we watched a party of **Wild Boar** running in one direction and then a few moments later returning, probably disturbed by a hunter with dogs. It being Sunday we came across several signs of hunting activity during the day. The River Tamuja provided some scenic shots of exposed rock and lichen-covered trees. We found a group of 18 **Great Bustards** in an area close to Cáceres, but they were far too far away to photograph. However, we were rewarded by the impressive sight of a **Black Vulture** on the ground. We took a long dirt track, providing rather good opportunities for landscape photography. At the end we found a **Spanish Imperial Eagle** perched on a tree close to the track, but it flew off quickly as we approached. After coffee near Cáceres, we checked an area of plains near the Guadiloba Reservoir for a party of **Dotterel** that had been present, but apart from one bird flying over, none were to be found (perhaps again because of the disturbance by hunters), however we did see a fine male **Merlin**.

We had a picnic lunch under shelter near the village of Santa Marta de Magasca. After lunch we saw a group of vultures beside a cow which appeared to be having difficulties giving birth. We found a farmer who summoned a shepherd to check it out. Back on the plains we were rewarded nearby by a

flock of **Little Bustard** (about 35 birds) together with **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**. We also saw several **Red Kites**, a **Little Owl** and an **Iberian Grey Shrike**. The rain started, although we made two more stops to admire an abandoned house with stork nests and the shapes of the weathered granite. Back at the house, the rain was falling heavily so we timed the returned just right.

18th November 2019: Bonelli's Eagle Hide, Alcollarín Reservoir, Rice fields, Campo Lugar, Alcollarín

It was a fine sunny day. Martin took Norbert first thing to *rendez-vous* with Rubén for his session in the **Bonelli's Eagle** hide near Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Whilst Norbert was in the hide, Martin and Elke first made a short visit to the main square of Trujillo and then across the plains near Ibahernando, with a visit to the small lake at Canchalejas. Finally, whilst Elke and Martin were having a coffee, Norbert called to say that he was ready to leave the hide. We met Norbert again at the *rendez-vous* spot and he was very happy with the session, seeing two **Bonelli's Eagles**, as well **Egyptian Mongoose**. We were ready for our picnic, which we had at the Alcollarín Reservoir. Here we could see **Great Cormorants**, **Mallard** and **Little Egrets**.



We spent the afternoon on the rice fields near the village of Palazuelo. Here there were large flocks of **Common Cranes**. Most were fairly flighty but we came across a very obliging small group which didn't even fly when a cyclist went past with dogs. **Glossy Ibis** and **Black-headed Gulls** were also in the area. Further along we found a group of **Great Bustard** together with **Common Cranes** in a small wet pasture. We then cross the plains near Campo Lugar, coming across a small group of **Little Bustards**.

We completed the day at the dam of the Alcollarín Reservoir to witness the arrival of at least two thousand **Common Cranes**. At one point they flew up in great commotion as a **Golden Eagle** passed over the flock.

19th November 2019: Vulture Hide and Monfragüe National Park

Today we enjoyed light cloud and sunny spells. We headed north on the road from Trujillo through a vast *dehesa* landscape, where Iberian pigs and **Common Cranes** were feeding. We met Jesús who took us into his Vulture hide at La Cañada, just outside Torrejón El Rubio. **Griffon Vultures** were already in attendance. As soon as we settled in, **Azure-winged Magpies**, **Crested Larks**, **Spotless Starlings** arrived to start pecking at the carrion. We did not have to wait too long for **Griffon Vultures** to arrive and start feeding, **Red Kites** swooped in and **Ravens** moved in for morsels.



Everything was happening and then suddenly the vultures flew off into the trees. Onto the scene wandered a huge *mastein* dog. On one occasion the vultures tried to return but the dog saw them off. Despite this interruption, it was actually quite fascinating to watch. The vultures behaved as they would have done on the African plains, waiting in the trees nearby as hyenas took their turn. The dog went off with some bones and then the vultures returned.

This second part was even more productive than the first. Now, amongst the **Griffon Vultures** we saw that a **Black Vulture** had landed. Even more exciting was the arrival of an immature **Spanish Imperial Eagle**. Soon nothing left of the food, so we requested an additional session. Unbelievably even more vultures came back, along with more Black Vultures, just minutes after Jesús had departed.



After the session, we had a welcome coffee in Torrejón El Rubio followed by stop at Peña Falcon where we could watch vultures in the context of their vast rocky gorge where they breed and roost. **Blue Rock Thrush** was also present. We had our picnic on the wooded bank of the Tagus River, looking across to the Cardinal's Bridge, built in 1450. A tame **Red Deer** had to be gently encouraged to back off.

We then ascended to the Monfragüe Castle, taking an excellent circular route through picturesque moss-covered rocks and stunted trees. In the woodland there were **Firecrests** and **Crested Tits**. At the top, we were rewarded with superb views of the landscape, a full 360°.

As we approached Trujillo the late afternoon light suggested an opportunity and we stopped to the west of the town for some photography.

20th November 2019: Trujillo, River Almonte, Belén Plains

In contrast to the two previous days, it stayed wet and overcast all day. We spent the morning in the nearby medieval town of Trujillo, walking up to the Moorish Fort and then down through the walled town, including a nice walk on the outside of the walls on the western part of the town. We also visited the St. Mary's Church with its magnificent altarpiece. On the walk we saw birds like **Crag Martins** and **Girl Buntings**.

After coffee in the Main Square we drove through *dehesa* woodland north of Trujillo to the River Almonte, south of Jaraicejo. Here we had a picnic in a sheltered site and admired the three bridges crossing the river at this point.

We then drove through more *dehesa* to Torreceillas de la Tiesa and returned to Trujillo across the Belén Plains. A **Red Kite** sat rather glumly and wet on a pole. There were lots of **Lapwings** and we saw an **Iberian Grey Shrike**. Back at Trujillo, we visited the delightful communal 19th century laundry.

We were back earlier than usual to Casa Rural El Recuerdo, to sit by the fire, and Norbert took a short walk in late afternoon.

21st November 2019: Guadalupe and Villuercas Mountains

It was another heavily overcast and wet day, with heavy rain especially in the morning. We went first to Guadalupe at the southern end of the Villuercas Mountains to visit the church and part of the small town, followed by coffee in a bar in the little square. From there we drove up to get a view of the town and then entered the Villuercas Mountains (UNESCO Geological Park) via Cañamero, taking the road near Navalzuelas to the highest point in the range (about 1600 m).



Although shrouded in mist, the ascent was very attractive with autumn colours of the Pyrenean Oak and Sweet Chestnut. There was a brief respite from the rain which enabled us to picnic near the town of Roturas, with a beautiful view of the River Almonte gorge. We then approached the gorge from the west and rose to the village of Cabañas del Castillo. Here we had a lovely walk enjoying spectacular view of the cliffs and Cork Oak woodland. By now the rain had finished and **Griffon Vultures** were starting to soar. We also saw a **Peregrine**.

We returned via Aldeacentenera and Madroñera, taking advantage again of some excellent *dehesa* landscapes.

22nd November 2019: Rice fields near Madrigalejo

It was yet another day heavy rain until mid-afternoon when suddenly sunshine appeared from the west. We spent the first part of the day on the rice fields near Madrigalejo, watching **Common Cranes** in usually very difficult conditions. After a break for coffee in a bid to escape the rain, we continued south of the town, seeing more **Common Cranes** and also a group of **Great Bustards**. We

then headed to an area of *dehesa* at Moheda Alta where we saw many Iberian pigs.



Nearby, on a municipal park, we could shelter in a hide from the rain for our picnic. Despite the bad weather, we watched a pair of **Hen Harriers** at close quarters. We were at the point of heading home when the weather abruptly changed so we turned around and headed to the rice fields near Palazuelo. Here the light was amazing, and we enjoyed watching the landscape, more **Common Cranes**, as well as flocks of **Spanish Sparrows**. However, the highlight without a doubt was a gorgeous **Short-eared Owl**.



At the end of the afternoon, we crossed the plains of Campo Lugar and stopped at the Alcollarín Reservoir. However, compared with previous occasions, very few **Common Cranes** arrived to roost, so shortly after sunset we headed back to Casa Rural El Recuerdo.

23rd November 2019: Mérida and return to Lisbon



It was a day of sunshine with just a few brief showers once we were in Portugal. We bade farewell to Casa Rural El Recuerdo and headed south-west to the capital of Extremadura: Mérida. It had also been the capital of the Roman province of Lusitania. We parked, walked through a pretty park and onto the world's longest Roman Bridge. This was very productive bird wise, with an aseasonal **Booted Eagle**, **Black-crowned Night Herons**, **Kingfisher** and **White Storks**. We continued through the attractive park beside the River Guadiana to see the Roman aqueducts, bestowed with occupied **White Storks'** nests. After a coffee in the main square we returned to the car, admiring street art Purple Heron on the way, and continued on our journey to Lisbon.

It was a smooth drive, highlighted by numerous **Red Kites** and as we approached Lisbon the pylons bedecked by **White Storks'** nests, including one with no less than 15 (we know because Elke counted them)!

We arrived at the airport with ample time for the check-in.