

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Extremadura
7-14 March 1998

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The group

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Mike Edwards Jo Edwards	Leicester
John Wakerley Christine Wakerley	Bury St Edmunds
Kate Groom Barbara Gascoigne	Ipswich
Jenny Loring	Newcastle
Audrey Elson	Sevenoaks
Ian Schalburg	Seaford
Kate Abbott	Twickenham
Bernard Robinson Margaret Robinson	Stockport
Angela Turner Ann Suckling	Norfolk
Leaders: Graham Hearl Chris Durdin	Mallorca Norwich

Report written by Chris Durdin.
Illustrations by Rob Hume. Cover: white storks at Trujillo.

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. During the holiday, Carlota Viada Sauleda of SEO's Madrid office came to Trujillo to collect the cheque for £400. This brings the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £3,570. A thank-you letter from Carlota appears at the end of this report (but not this web version).

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Saturday 7 March: Madrid to Trujillo

Fifteen of us arrived in the late afternoon at Madrid after a smooth flight from Gatwick, and there to meet us were Bernard & Margaret and Graham Hearl who had flown in from Manchester and Mallorca respectively. The clean white Ford Tourneo minibuses were checked and loaded, and we were soon doing battle with the Madrid motorways. Dusk was already gathering as we left the urban sprawl towards Trujillo. About two-thirds of the way there we broke the journey for drinks and sandwiches at a service station where the man behind the desk told us that John Major had called five or six times on route for his summer holidays. Perhaps it was true, or maybe all English men look like a little like John Major to a Spanish service station assistant. We then journeyed on and were soon in Trujillo and at the Hotel las Cigüeñas.

Sunday 8 March – Belén Plain

Spring had arrived in Trujillo for house martins were already building nests on the back on the hotel, but the weather was more like that of English summer's day, warm at first and soon very warm. Breakfast at eight was our usual routine, including today, or at least for all those who remembered to move on their alarm clocks an hour for Spanish time. On a wet flash opposite the hotel there were spotless starlings, white wagtails and meadow pipits.

The day was spent in a gentle tour of the Belén plain, close to Trujillo, with as many stops as the wildlife demanded along the way or Graham had tricks up his sleeve. The blaze of spring colour was often stunning: pink sheets of the campion-like *Silene colorata*; yellow crucifers covering fields; and masses of white Spanish broom *Cytisus multiflorus*. The broom was the first of several flowers that were not in Blamey and Grey-Wilson's Mediterranean flowers and found in Polunin's Flowers of SW Europe, and not the last of which Graham knew anyway. But eyes were soon looking upwards from these as the minibuses stopped to admire a stunning great spotted cuckoo close to the road, soon followed by crested larks, ravens and the first close white stork.

How long would it be before it was 'just another white stork' I wondered as we made our first exploration on foot a few hundred metres along a green lane, Tuesday, Monday or this afternoon? More like a few minutes, it turned out. A southern grey shrike – now split as a separate species from the great grey shrike – was memorably misheard by Kate A. as 'sodding great shrike', a name that stuck all week and for some of us, I suspect, for ever. Nine cattle egrets, some with pronounced buff coloration on their plumage for the nesting season were with cattle in the fields; perched hoopoe and stonechat were easy to see, followed by Spanish sparrows which are happily increasing in this area and nothing like as elusive as they once were. It was Jenny who found the hummingbird hawk-moth and Bernard the little bustard, for which we retraced our steps to view through the six or seven telescopes we had between us.

'The best birding in 27 years' said Ian with a twinkle in his eye, immediately denying it and changing the figure to 28. But better was still to come as we stopped to watch a group of calandra larks overhead, with their distinctive black underwing and white trailing edge to the wing and an atmospheric rasping note in their song flight. Then a flock of 25 little bustards, showing much white on the wing, not unlike giant snow buntings, and the first of daily black vultures, that barn door of a bird here in the best place to see them in Europe.

Picnic lunches were every day a treat; always with bread, water and wine for those that wished, and a selection of meat, cheese and fruit. The place was as good, especially for a pair of red-rumped swallows on a fence which were evidently nesting in a culvert under the road. Completing the picture were white storks on their massive nests in trees beyond a small lake, soaring griffon vultures and sand crocuses *Romulea columnnae* at our feet, with the backing sounds of the clanging of sheep's bells and the gentle but persistent 'zip...zip...zip' of a fan-tailed warbler.

The plains were searched without luck for great bustards and we took a brief break from the excitement with a drink in a bar at Torrecillas de la Tiesa, outside which there were Indian bead trees covered in beads.

Next stop was an at first sight unattractive truckstop near the motorway at Carrascal, but it was ideal place to view an area of holm oak dehesa – wood pasture – under which there was a sheet of annual daisies, a flock of sheep and several azure-winged magpies in and out of the trees. Seventeen of us took these in while Graham slipped quietly away a few yards in order to locate a small group of vultures on the ground. Perhaps more striking still was the low flypast of black and griffon vultures, to the sound of exclamations and clicking shutters.

The final stop was by a Roman bridge over the Río Almonte at Jaraisejo. Like the many seasonal wetlands we'd already seen, there were white sheets of water crowfoot here with frogs hopping around. A crag martin sat on one of the arches and little ringed plovers were found on the gravel beyond the river channel. Tiny daffodils turned out to be common jonquils *Narcissus jonquilla* and the small iris, barbary nut, was frequent here as elsewhere. Then back to base and time for a walk into town for some, a cup of tea for others before gathering for our daily log followed by the evening meal. The meals turned out to be quite a treat: tasty, varied, and always very Spanish, with plentiful wine and water included.

Monday 9 March – Monfragüe

Somewhere north of the pigs in the dehesa a stop by the roadside led to the discovery of sawfly orchids. The lupins here and so often by the road were narrow-leaved lupins *Lupinus angustifolius*. There were choughs and crag martins on arrival in Monfragüe, then up the steps to the monastery past meadow clary and weasel snout (a toadflax). The reward for the climb was immediate in the form of several black vultures and a soaring black stork. A botanical diversion included corn gromwell, star-of-Bethlehem, tassel hyacinth, the tiny, sticky-leaved rue-leaved saxifrage plus rustyback fern and with an effort the name of *Paronychia argentea* was put to the prostrate silvery plant here and often seen elsewhere. As we started our descent there was a long distraction from several blackcaps, a robin and even a song thrush plus a stunning pair of red-rumped swallows. Today the pull in off the road opposite the rock of Peñafalcon was relatively quiet.

Lunch was in view of a dam and also a cliff with eight griffon vulture nests. Around us were the distinctive crinkle-cut leaves of the mullein *Verbascum sinuatum*, large blue alkanets *Anchusa azurea* and the blue-flowered form of scarlet pimpernel. The hide here adds little to the views of the griffons and everyone was far more impressed by the pale, soaring form of a short-toed eagle.

Early afternoon in the heat was quiet at the next stop with a fine view over the scrub where subalpine warblers sang but not much and with little show. The stop had been the classic place to see Spanish imperial eagle but word had reached Graham – and Carlota from SEO – that due to poisoning they were there no longer. A black redstart did show well. A little further along there was much mud around the lake on which we found a water pipit with distant little ringed plovers.

Tiétar cliffs lived up to their reputation with a procession of raptors: griffons, often seen descending with feet outstretched, black vulture, black kite and short-toed eagle, and distant alpine swifts beyond the birds of prey. It was good for botanising too with scores of delicate hoop petticoat daffodils, a few whitish drooping flowers of angel's tears *Narcissus triandrus*, meadow gagea, tree heath and laurestinus (the familiar garden *Viburnum tinus*) in the scrub and many Spanish bluebells *Endymia hispanicus*.

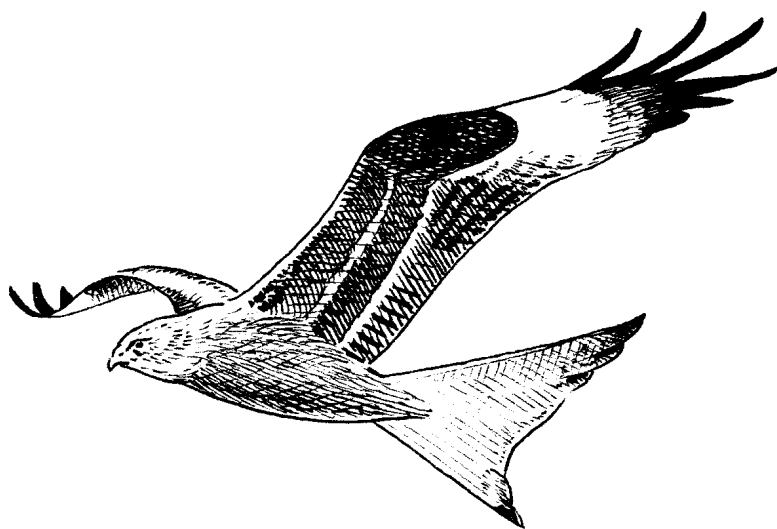
There was a girl bunting when we returned to the lunch spot on the way back: also found were Margaret's sunglasses!

Tuesday 10 March – Valdesalor

A 7.30 breakfast to allow an early start through Cáceres and into the plain to its south at Valdesalor. We parked by the bridge into this open grassy plain and an inspection revealed that to take the

minibuses across the bridge may be possible but not worth the risk. A glorious pair of red-rumped swallows cruised around the bridge and calandra and crested larks were with us from start to finish.

For dry steppe country on a warm day the landscape was surprisingly green, with sand crocuses and hoop petticoat narcissi along the way. But this was a place above all for birdwatching. A distant flock of what appeared to be waders were exactly that when they settled: 24 golden plovers, late winter visitors. We passed a farm, where the dogs greeted us loudly but without menace. Then, as we took a right turn, Graham picked up some distant dots through the heat haze: as we approached them their numbers increased to 14 and they became increasingly recognisable as great bustards. Some black-bellied sandgrouse dropped in, but were little more than dots in the telescopes on the fields as we studied them over lunch a few hundred metres before we might have met the railway line crossing the plain. On our return to the minibuses there were linnets and a great spotted cuckoo by the bus, chiffchaffs singing in the reedmace and a red kite that seemed to be dropping into the road.



We chose to come back the scenic route. There were distractions: a southern grey shrike on a wire; short-toed eagle low overhead; storks nesting and bill-clapping on a grain silo. Then in an open, farmed area, Graham again found more distant dots – now without haze - that were clearly 40 great bustards. Two flew past us, settled in a field nearby, and with care we approached close enough to see the whiskers on the male.

A photostop close to Trujillo and we were back at base. The evening log at 7.45 came with Graham's usual question about our bird of the day, where strangely no-one said great bustard. He spotted the wind-up about a third of the way round...

Wednesday 11 March – Monroy

It was one of those days for exploring in a different direction, this time north towards Monroy. Again sunny and bright, but a cool breeze to start with as we looked at stripe-necked terrapins on the concrete edge of a farm pond. Spanish sparrows were especially obvious here, with black kite, cattle egrets and other regulars around. Monroy itself has a pretty town square and we took coffee in the bar confusingly named Casino. A short walk to the church followed where white storks bill-clapped and copulated despite the group of onlookers.

Further along we stopped for our first woodchat shrike, then picnicked in the lee of a hedge. Next stop was a colony of white storks in stone pines, then the next for a pale grey shape that at first dipped out of sight over the rise but was seen well enough to be identified as a male Montagu's harrier. A left hand turn and a grey harrier was over the wheat fields again, then three of them, but they turned out to be hen harriers – a potential trap for holiday leaders and a reminder of the care needed on identification.

A hunting party of lesser kestrels, hundreds of goldfinches, a male little bustard and a group of some 15 azure-winged magpies were seen along the way. Then, in the late afternoon, there seemed to be a buzz of activity as we approached home. Highlights were some 60 little bustards in a flock, plus nine pin-tailed and a few black-bellied sandgrouse, albeit at a distance.

Thursday 12 March – Trujillo and the Belén plain

A free morning in Trujillo, though we walked as a group through the market as far as the *plaza mayor* – the main square - which is surrounded by impressive buildings under the watchful eye of Trujillo's most famous son, the conquistador Pizarro. The Moorish castle above the town offers fine views over open countryside, and there are also excellent views to be had of the scores of lesser kestrels and many white storks that make Trujillo their home. Many had a coffee in the square before we reconvened at the Hotel las Cigüeñas at one o'clock.

Lunch was in a sheltered lane not far into the Belén plain. A wander down the lane followed, splitting informally into two groups, though not far apart. The first found Spanish festoon; the second studied Thekla and crested larks feeding side by side; both watched feeding lesser kestrels close to.



Joining us at our evening gathering was Carlota Viada Sauleda of La Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO), the Spanish Ornithological Society. She told us of the wildlife of the steppes, and the threats to wildlife that SEO is tackling as diverse as poisoning, electric pylons and agricultural intensification. We presented her with a cheque for £400 and we all came away with SEO badges and an admiration for the challenges facing SEO's small team.

Friday 13 May – Monfragüe

By the Plasencia road north from Trujillo a pink blob caught my eye and there, opposite some large, white gate posts, was the most stunning pink butterfly orchid. Yellow anemones were also found by the roadside and a woodlark was singing.

At Peñafalcon, there was much more life than on our previous mid-afternoon visit. There must have been 100 griffons as we arrived at the lay-by, and three black storks kept us, the griffons and the rock company. Blue rock thrushes were performing well, perching in their well-known style on the high points of rocks, and after wandering a little way along the road two rock buntings were found below us. A shrubby pea was named by some passing students as the local subspecies of *Adenocarpus hispanicus*.

At Villarreal de San Carlos we paused at the coffee shop which also had a fine selection of postcards of local wildlife, T-shirts and even videos about the area. Unlucky 13th came true when a minibus mirror got caught on a roadside sign, but the parts were all found and an excellent re-assembly job proved possible. Lunch was spent studying ants carrying off bits of bread and lettuce; other wildlife included woodlarks and a short-toed eagle on a pylon.

The last stop on the last full day and Graham still had an ace up his sleeve. Spanish festoon is a possibility close to the Río Almonte, he advised, and no sooner were we out of the buses there was the most perfect specimen of this pretty butterfly which was swooped into the butterfly net for close examination in an insect pot. Terrapins and a kingfisher on the river completed the day.

Saturday 14 March – Trujillo to Madrid

An earlyish breakfast, promptly away at 8.30 and we made good progress along the motorway. Storks nesting on a motorway sign above the traffic and two great bustards for those at the front of the following bus were two highlights. After refuelling close to Madrid, the usual waiting and shopping at the airport were followed by a smooth flight home.

Butterflies

Small heath
Clouded yellow
Red admiral
Wall
Dappled white
Scarce swallowtail
Green hairstreak
Small white
Spanish festoon

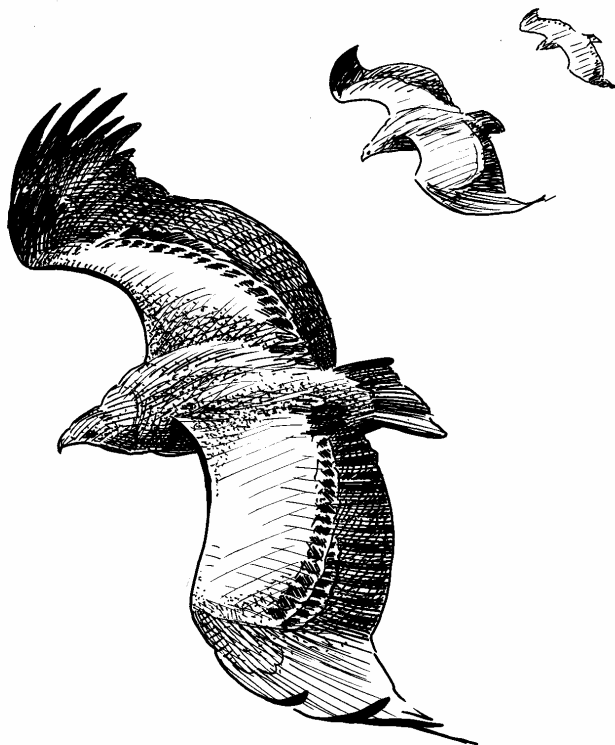
Holly blue

Reptiles/amphibians/mammals

Stripe-necked terrapin
Iberian wall lizard

Marsh frog

Rabbit
Hare



Extremadura bird list 1998

This is the combined list for the group. H = heard only.

Little grebe	Woodlark
Cormorant	Skylark
Cattle egret	Crag martin
Grey heron	Swallow
Black stork	Red-rumped swallow
White stork	House martin
Mallard	Water pipit
Black kite	Meadow pipit
Red kite	Grey wagtail
Egyptian vulture	White wagtail
Griffon vulture	Wren H
Black vulture	Robin
Short-toed eagle	Black redstart
Hen harrier	Stonechat
Montagu's harrier	Blue rock thrush
Buzzard	Blackbird
Lesser kestrel	Song thrush
Kestrel	Mistle thrush
Peregrine	Fan-tailed warbler
Red-legged partridge	Subalpine warbler
Moorhen	Sardinian warbler
Coot	Blackcap
Little bustard	Chiffchaff
Great bustard	Long-tailed tit
Stone-curlew H	Blue tit
Little ringed plover	Great tit
Golden plover	Short-toed treecreeper
Lapwing	Southern grey shrike
Snipe	Woodchat shrike
Green sandpiper	Jay
Common sandpiper	Azure-winged magpie
Black-headed gull	Magpie
Lesser black-backed gull	Chough
Black-bellied sandgrouse	Jackdaw
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	Carrion crow
Rock dove	Raven
Woodpigeon	Spotless starling
Great spotted cuckoo	House sparrow
Little owl	Spanish sparrow
Swift	Rock sparrow
Pallid swift	Chaffinch
Alpine swift	Serin
Kingfisher	Goldfinch
Hoopoe	Linnet
Great spotted woodpecker	Girl bunting
Calandra lark	Rock bunting
Crested lark	Corn bunting
Thekla lark	

Total: 95 species