

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Extremadura
19 – 26 March 2005

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Holiday participants

Susan Crowther Tony Crowther	Cambridge
Derek Boughton Neville Beeson	Kent
Bill Simmonds Margaret Chilvers	Huntingdon
Patricia Duffield	Croydon
Anne Law Robin Law	Essex
Jean Hallam	Derby
Joy Barker	Cambridge
John Rumpus Rosemary MacDonald	Kent Isle of Man

Leaders

John Muddeman	Madrid
Russell Leavett	Harwich

Report by John Muddeman: birds and other checklists by Russell Leavett.

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: Trujillo with white storks.

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. The conservation contribution this year of £25 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the new Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, leading to a total of €575 (£402). During the holiday, Marcelino Cardalliaguet of SEO came to Finca Santa Marta to collect a cheque from this year's holiday in Extremadura. A thank-you letter from SEO appears at the end of this report.

This year's donations, including from another Honeyguide group in Extremadura in May, bring the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £9,885. The total conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays was at £33,330 at the end of 2004 and will be in the region of £38,000 by the end of 2005.

Extremadura **19 – 26 March 2005**

Sat 19 March – Madrid to Finca Santa Marta

A relatively late flight, and after we *finally* got the vehicles (thanks to Russell!), we made it down to Extremadura in good time. We arrived in the dark, but with just enough time for a brief introductory chat and introductory drinks from our host, Henri, and also to meet the members of the Speyside Wildlife group led by Darren Rees, also staying for the same period.

A couple of singing Scops Owls after dinner gave us the slip though, despite a quick look.

Sun 20 March – Zorita

An 8 o'clock meeting for an hour's walk before breakfast. Birds came thick and fast, including singing Hoopoe, plenty of Barn and 2 Red-rumped Swallows, Spotless Starlings on the roof, Azure-winged Magpies (*right*) in the gardens and fluting Woodlarks overhead. A singing Dunnock and Wren were around the buildings and Spanish Sparrows "shreeping" away under one of the stork's nests on the edge of Henri's land.



After breakfast we headed south in strangely warm and murky conditions, presumably of hot air pulled up from Africa on the southerly breeze and tinted with Saharan dust. This barely changed all day, making viewing colours often tricky.

Lesser Kestrels were flying over Zorita and we stopped to watch a few fly past. The extensive steppe near here seemed very dry and uninteresting, but a wader on a pond (a Spotted Redshank!) caused us to pull over (and flush a flock of Golden Plover in the process), and from the roadside here we noted numerous Lapwings, Corn Buntings and Crested Larks, plus two distant Great Spotted Cuckoos, a flock of Great Bustards and single male Northern and Black-eared Wheatears! The roadside verge also turned up Western Dappled White, (Spanish) Brown Argus and Small Heath butterflies, our first sand crocus flower and several black bee-flies. Being as spring was so late and the winter so dry this year though, the landscape had a rather sad and dried-up look to it.

Another stop on a side road revealed our first chunky Calandra Larks, plus more Great Bustards, this time with the sun from behind us, showing their rich colours, despite some heat haze. While a few us walked off to find odd moths and flowers, another group of almost 50 Great Bustards flew in and landed behind the first! The sun was trying to break through and warm things up and a few raptors, including Griffon Vultures were circling in the haze.

The nearby Embalse de Sierra Brava may look very sterile, but is a fabulous wintering site for duck and hosts Extremadura's only regular group of Black-necked Grebes, which we duly saw, some of them in fine breeding plumage. These were present along with plenty of Great Crested, Coot, Mallard and a few Shoveler out on the open water, and White Wagtails and a Little Ringed Plover along one shore.

Time was racing along, so we drove round into the nearby rice fields for lunch. A Hen Harrier hunted something successfully in an adjacent field and dropped almost immediately into a ditch to eat it. So we sat by the roadside and followed suit with our lunches, hearing a few tweets from a Zitting Cisticola and some Red Avadavats as we did so. A short stroll afterwards gave us flight views of these tiny invaders from India, but the breeze kept them down in the vegetation, while Joy almost trod on a Quail which flew up and round us.

The drive to a drinks break proved to be oddly eventful. About 100 Golden Plovers were spread liberally across a pasture, but a dead bird hanging in a barbed wire fence crossing a pool lead me to jump a fence to see what it was, only to flush a Jack Snipe in the process! An amazingly fragrant orchard in full bloom ahead was also attractive to numerous Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Serins, and our second and third Iberian Hares of the day, all seemingly attracted by the presence of irrigation water and a bit of cover from the masses of white flowers. The next pond ahead also had dead Cattle Egret and Moorhen hung up in a barbed wire fence beside it, but also over 50 live Moorhens feeding and swimming around - a remarkable concentration.

A drinks and comfort stop immediately afterwards was well appreciated, but with still a little time left afterwards, we headed down to an arable area near Vegas Altas. After a brief visit to a small river where a flock of fly-by Waxbills was all-too-brief, we finished off with a 'quick' trip through some arable fields, ostensibly to look for sandgrouse. We rapidly found three Stone-curlews first though, which gave excellent views and proved just how good their cryptic plumage is. A couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were then spotted in flight once we'd got out to look at a fine female Montagu's Harrier perched on the ground. This last bird rapidly sailed up and headed off north. Tracking down the sandgrouse we flushed others in a field opposite (and where a fourth Stone-curlew ran into cover!), with some 25 in total disappearing just over the ridge, plus the original pair on the ground finally been seen by almost all. These were then pushed to one side when two male Little Bustards put in a running and then flying display in an adjacent field, only to be topped off when a Marsh Harrier, which had been sat for the whole time on a post, flapped off and immediately put up a superb Short-eared Owl, which spiralled up and then drifted slowly and gently back down again, hanging for a long time in the stiff breeze. What a find, and my first in Spain, despite having lived here for 8 years!

Tea, coffee, cakes and call-over of the days sightings back at the finca (now late) were much appreciated, and revealed the astonishing total of 93 species for the day, easily a record!

Mon 21 March – Monfragüe

Rain had been forecast and after a dry start, a bit of rain and heavy cloud appeared as we headed towards Monfragüe. In fact, we got wet on the bridge over the Río Almonte as rain came down again, but at least the Crag Martins, a Kingfisher and a flock of Meadow Pipits kept things busy.

Another roadside stop ahead revealed a singing Thekla Lark and a fine Woodchat Shrike, but despite more boding cloud, even when we climbed up to park beneath the castle at Monfragüe, the rain held off. The cliff above us held a fine male Black Redstart, lots of Crag Martins and a couple of Griffon Vultures, but the numbers of vultures streaming along the ridge overhead were just wonderful.

We climbed up on foot past a water lorry trapped by too many cars parked in the last car park and contemplated the near constant stream of Griffon Vultures coming past us from the pinnacle of Peñafalcón opposite. Clouds of these birds were coming up from the ridge to the west (and a couple of times, over a hundred rose up at once), then filing past at all heights, including below us. A magnificent sight! A fine group of Hawfinches was also flying round the treetops well below us, and with scopes perched safely on the outer wall we looked down at these lovely birds, the first views several of the party had ever had of this often elusive species. Russell then came up trumps again with a pale-headed raptor perched opposite, though before we could get scopes on it, just seconds later the fine adult Bonelli's Eagle leapt off its craggy look-out and started to drift over the river towards and then past us, to soon disappear along the ridge.



A stunning male Rock Bunting showed only for a few as we started our descent, and given more and more visitors arriving, we moved on for a comfort stop and drink at Villareal de San Carlos, then headed to the 'Tiétar cliffs' for lunch. This was terrific, with a pair of Egyptian Vultures almost permanently on the ground or in flight and whistling red Black Kites plus nest opposite, a pair of Bonelli's Eagles drifted rapidly past behind, and a couple of ticking Hawfinches tried to visit the fruiting elms, despite a crowd of students... In addition, after a bit of waiting so as not to upset two young ladies who'd gone into the bushes, we also had fine views of a lovely singing male Subalpine Warbler, including undertaking its erratic song-flight overhead.

Being as time was moving on a little, we decided to push through to the far end of the park since there were reports of nesting Spanish Imperial Eagles... A "*Carretera Cortada*" sign appeared to be a mistake until we suddenly met a load of workmen in the road... Fortunately, they had just resumed after lunch and the heavy machines laying asphalt were not under way yet, and despite some grumbling from the foreman, we were reluctantly let through... The last vehicles to do so, as it turned out. The last stretch of road in the park parallels the river, and some fine white-headed *sinensis* Great Cormorants on some rocks caused us to stop and look, and to find a pair of Black Storks on a nest.

These were even seen mating, not an easy task being under a low overhang, but delayed us a little as we admired their lovely iridescent plumage. We could also keep an eye on the 'end' of the valley, where a few Griffons were about, and a Spanish Imperial Eagle suddenly appeared in flight too.

After duly transferring and finding the viewpoint full of noisy workmen, we parked round the corner where the road hadn't been cut away at the edge in preparation for the imminent resurfacing work...

A smart Black Stork was gliding over the peak of the Portilla del Tiétar, and as we stood and watched this, a Red-legged Partridge dropped out of the scrub above and fluttered down just over our heads, appearing somewhat bemused, before landing just a couple of yards away on the bank below us! A singing Blue Rock Thrush could be heard on the other side (and was later seen behind us), but while looking at a Spanish Imperial Eagle nest, an English couple came up for a quick chat. A couple of minutes later, they casually said, "by the way, are you interested in seeing Eagle Owl?" After a short walk and some directions, we were soon peering intensely at the lower branches of a small shrub on the rockface opposite, through which we could just make out the back of an adult owl, and every now and again, the head of a chick Eagle Owl bobbing around. Though difficult to see, with patience we almost all managed to see both, with Tony even briefly seeing the vivid eyes of the adult glaring over towards us. The favour was soon returned however as one of the eagles suddenly appeared and flew round over the rocks, and the couple left happy. This later reappeared and flew off, the other adult following suit about 30 minutes later. All this in itself would have been more than sufficient, but a pale blob in a tree downriver materialised into a fine Short-toed Eagle in the scopes, while an ever-impressive Black Vulture also flew in and perched on the rocks directly opposite us. Amazing!

We even had time to head back to the finca via a side-arm of the Embalse de Arrocampo, where singing Reed and Sedge Warblers, flitting Chiffchaffs, a couple of dashing Common Snipe, a few Common Teal and lots of passing Sand Martins were duly watched once we'd admired a gaudy Purple Swamp-hen largely exposed on the edge of the water in thick reedmace. A drive along a road here also revealed a pair of fine Thekla Larks, but time was pressing, so despite passing more of the reservoir we pressed on back to the finca for typically well-received teas and coffees. Again the number of species had been remarkably high given the variety of different habitats visited and no less than 84 species were recorded... Could this continue?

Tues 22 March – Santa Marta de Magasca

Thick cool mist was swirling around the finca as the early walkers went out at 7:30. While plenty was audible, relatively few birds were seen, though included both Willow Warbler and Greenfinch, additions to the rapidly growing list. The mist cleared just as we got to breakfast, and white clouds in a blue sky was promising.

We headed west towards the Santa Marta de Magasca area, with pseudosteppe (=open grassy plains which have formed after the clearance of the original scrub and tree cover which would be there naturally) and holm oak *dehesa* habitats dominating. Two Woodchat Shrikes and a few Thekla Larks gave a fine show on the roadside in the first trees, but on reaching the first fields, little was at first evident. A few distant raptors included Black and Red Kites, but a large Great Bustard stood sedately on the skyline, apparently keeping an eye on proceedings.

A few Spanish Sparrows and Crested Larks kept us busy until Russell picked out a single male Little Bustard in a thistly field. Our attention turned to this, with then three, increasing to five, then seven, nine and finally eleven Little Bustards finally appearing from 'nowhere' among the thistles and walking about feeding in a grassy clearing. A pair of passing Common Buzzards started spiralling low overhead however, and we were suddenly treated to group after group of Little Bustards rising up from behind a little ridge and climbing upwards, with finally some 80 or so in the flock wheeling in the sun. A glorious sight!

Another track shortly ahead saw c. 20 of these (same?) bustards in winter wheat very close to the vehicle, but we were now focussed on the aerial antics of a few stunning Montagu's Harriers over the same field, with one fine male perched quietly on a rock along the track ahead. We watched them again further down, but in our 'quest' for sandgrouse also discovered a large pond containing a pair of Common Teal, various Gadwalls and Common Pochards, plus a surprising seven Tufted Ducks and a Black-tailed Godwit. One of the numerous passing Black Vultures suddenly started to drop into a nearby field, and this rapidly attracted more, some 10 birds (plus one Griffon) finally accruing round some amorphous-looking but clearly highly sought-after scrap of carrion.

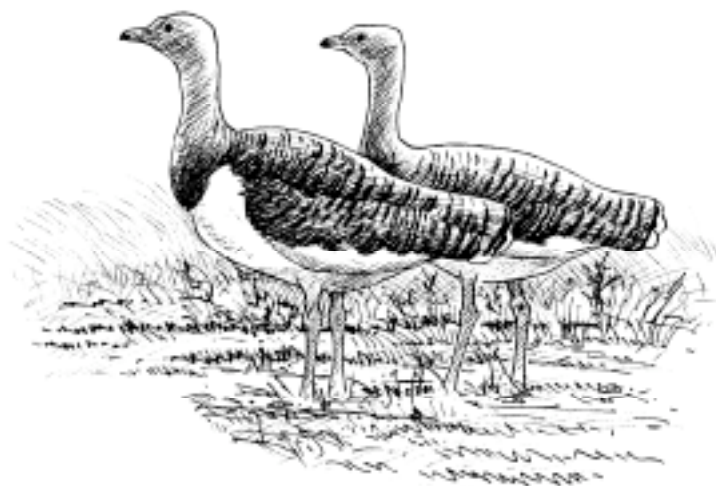
A pre-lunch drink was clearly called for, so we sent a while at a café in the village (with a passing Booted Eagle of interest), and then continued down for lunch by the Río Magasca.

My favourite spot was sadly a bit smelly, given some noxious pollution that had gathered on the surface, so most of us sat upwind. Two Green Sandpipers, a couple of Kingfishers, a male Cleopatra and a couple of Long-tailed Tits were good rewards for finding this pleasant spot. In addition, given time and a good stick, I managed to break the offending mat of muck up and sent it downstream, hoping it would be broken down more rapidly (and to clean it up before returning in two weeks time). A very high Golden Eagle was a good find just before we left.

We started a long return towards the finca, first finding a Little Owl missing one eye (a "little owl" as was joked), then after passing a number of Red-legged Partridges on the roads, stopped for a rather flighty Great Spotted Cuckoo. Getting the scopes out for this produced one of those magic moments: first we noticed numerous Red and Black Kites wheeling around and Black Vultures passing over, plus a large group of noisy Ravens. A pair of Golden Eagles passed over at speed, and while Russell tried to refind a Booted Eagle he'd just located, I turned to find a hovering Short-toed Eagle. When turning back for the latter, I then noticed a large sandy-coloured bird on a small pylon - a young Spanish Imperial Eagle! This was amazing, a Raven beside it looking the size of a starling... It finally took off, revealing its pattern both above and below. I jokingly said that to see all five Spanish eagles in a day was a difficult feat, but about 10 minutes later some frantic calling by a Raven alerted us to a chase, and passing high over at speed was a young Bonelli's Eagle, the Raven hot on its tail! All five eagles from one spot on the road in less than an hour... Extremaduran magic!

Time was now running on, so after considerable fruitless searching for sandgrouse we stopped for a fine pair of Egyptian Vultures scanning a nearby field, only to see nine Great Bustards (*below*) fly across (which we later saw close by from the road), and an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle displaying at another juvenile in the distance! A pair of sandgrouse were finally found feeding amongst the first flush of flowers of the spring, and we finally had good views of Black-bellied in excellent light as the shuffled along. What a finale!

We got back to the finca in good time, only for me to discover that Marcelino Cardalliaguet, the Extremaduran conservation officer for the Spanish Ornithological Society (SEO/BirdLife) was giving us a talk that night (and not Wednesday as I'd thought). This was terrific and we rounded off by presenting SEO with a cheque to help in conservation causes in the area.



Weds 23 March – Cabañas del Castillo

After the max. 24°C the day before, the cold, breezy and cloudy dawn was a major change.

We set out and stopped at the 'three bridges' near Jaraicejo. The Río Almonte was looking lovely, and a fishing Little Egret, mud-collecting Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins, a large flock of foraging Spanish Sparrows, a pair of Little Ringed Plovers, a Water Pipit, a circling Short-toed Eagle and an at first elusive, but finally well-seen pair of Cirl Buntings gave us an entertaining time. Several went for short walks and to take photos of the old bridge.

Our next, unplanned, stop was in an area of low scrub, though only Thekla Larks were in it, despite interest in passing Black and Griffon Vultures, Booted and Short-toed Eagle, and nearby, a couple of brief Calandra Larks in flight. Pausing in the road ahead for another pair of Egyptian Vultures, Russell came up trumps again with a superb male Black-eared Wheatear.

After a short comfort and drinks stop we were off again, this time to admire the unbelievable sight of hundreds of Black and Griffon Vultures coming down to feed at a feeding station in the *dehesa*. These carpeted the trees and ground in places, and the rocky crags behind, while plenty of Red and Black Kites, Egyptian Vultures, Ravens and White Storks all added to the fray.

Lunch was, not surprisingly, a little delayed as a result, but in the valley of the headwaters of the Almonte, was a treat. A Great Spotted Woodpecker decided to perch on a wire instead of the adjacent pole it later hopped onto, but a flighty male Rock Bunting gave great views to a number of the party.

Rain started as we left, but then cleared shortly afterwards as we reached Cabañas del Castillo. Peering up at the rockface, only a very brief view was made of a Black Wheatear (or so we thought

until call-over), but two Alpine Accentors and plenty of Linnets and Black Redstarts were more confiding. A fine blue Blue Rock Thrush sang his ditty and sat out at length for us to admire and a pair of Red-billed Choughs called and flew past. Round the back of the rock the breeze was chilly, but we admired the fabulous views over the Villuercas mountains and valleys and noted a brief Peregrine which raced in from the opposite ridge and disappeared behind a cliff.

Conditions were degenerating, so we made a beeline for the buses and thankfully got there just as the rain set in. Indeed, the castle and even the top of the village were swallowed up in cloud as we left. We returned eventually across a chilly (10°C), wet and breezy Belén plain, where just a couple of Calandras were the highlight.

The clouds broke just after our return, and after our ritual coffee, cakes and call-over, a few managed to get out and see bits and bobs, including four Champagne Orchid spikes in flower and a glorious sunset.

Thurs 24 March – Trujillo and Río Tozo

A somewhat simple day in theory, the plan being a visit to the ancient town of Trujillo, followed by lunch and then a walk along the Río Tozo to the reservoir of the same name...

The weather was rather finer than previous days with broken cloud and warmer conditions and pre-breakfast birding revealed a few of the typical local birds for those who were out early...

Trujillo was typically busy on its market day, though as it was Easter Thursday many of the normal shops were shut. We started with a quick look at the bottom of the town where a few pairs of Pallid Swift breed under roofs, and the good light allowed excellent views of their paler plumage and large throat patch. After parking, we walked up to the Plaza Mayor where the statue of Francisco Pizarro on his horse dominates, and the various old buildings form the main part of this fine old hilltop town.

We started here with a walk up to the castle, including walking to the 'far' corner where I posed the 'trick' question of "where's the finca?" This was finally resolved and we walked a little farther along the side wall to see one of the large stones, incorporated (albeit sideways!) into the rebuilt wall at some point, and including both a Moorish moon and also some Latin (?) writing.

Tony, who had briefly scanned the ramparts, put his binoculars down, turned to me and casually said, "John, there's something over here that might be of interest." Assuming that there might be a nice Blue Rock Thrush about, I looked up only to see a large, rather scruffy-looking blackish bird with long down-curved beak, sat on the top of the ruins of a nearby church. A BALD IBIS! I'm not exactly sure what I shouted in reply, but there it was, a Bald Ibis... All those present managed to get a look, but of course, the scope was in the van at the bottom of the town. Tony generously kept watch as I walked down to get the scope and digiscoping gear (and call some Spanish birdwatching colleagues and Darren of the Speyside group in the process) and we went into the castle to get slightly closer and a raised view for a number of photos. The long and the short of all this is, that despite it looking a bit odd, it's apparently a typical immature in intermediate plumage: freshly moulted green and purple-toned blackish plumage with shaggy crest typical of birds in the spring of their second year, but still retaining the grey and white 'down' on the head typical of a juvenile. It **was** indeed a Bald Ibis, one of the rarest birds in the world and new to everyone present except Russell, though his last was in 1963...! The bird has apparently been present in the area since early January, but apart from being sighted then and with the rumour of a sighting in early March, had not been confirmed. What is all the more remarkable is that it is actually the second record in Spain this winter, the first being a full adult south of Salamanca in late December, and which was assumed to have then passed by Trujillo on its way south ... not so!

Clearly, we met up a fraction later than intended in the square. After meeting a good Spanish friend who'd just digiscoped the ibis and a quick trip to a shop selling local specialities, we headed off for a rather calmer afternoon along the Río Tozo in the midst of the *dehesa*. Lunch was a fairly quiet affair, only rocked by the presence of a large pale dragonfly hawking on the river. An immigrant Vagrant Hawker, almost certainly brought into Spain by the warm south winds of a few days before and another true rarity.

We strolled along the riverside, noting Otter and Mink spraint as we went, plus a few Snipe, Greenfinch, Stonechats and Chiffchaffs, as well as various common raptors, and a green-and-brown Spanish Psammmodromus lizard hiding under a sheet of rusted corrugated iron. The flowers were still very poor here though, especially given the cold winter and dry conditions underfoot, though a few sand crocus and hoop-petticoat daffodils had ventured out. Butterflies were rather few too, though (Spanish) Brown Argus and Small Heath were common, and Western Dappled Whites sped past. A small darker butterfly caught my eye and this was the first of several freshly emerged Provence

Hairstreaks we finally found, the underside being quite striking with black-spotted orange forewing and hairy green hindwing and body.

We sneaked up towards the reservoir, which had lots of birds about and were pleasantly surprised with the diversity. Apart from the plague of horrid white geese, two Spoonbills fed in the shallows, Pintail and Wigeon brightened up large numbers of Gadwall, Mallard, Shoveler and Teal, and in the grassy inflow area, two Wood Sandpipers held sway with three Little Ringed Plovers, a Green Sandpiper and a couple of wading Black-winged Stilts. This was a fine mix, increased by the finding of several Greenshank, a single spotted Redshank and to top it all, a stunning male Garganey in full breeding plumage! Even the grass we stood on had its interest, since masses of little earthstar fungi had popped up recently and were scattered about. A kingfisher put in an appearance and raptors (though largely ignored) were continually flying over, with a scuffle between two revealing a short dog-fight between a Black Kite and one of a pair of Bonelli's Eagles which passed over.

We eventually dragged ourselves away from this lovely spot, and over afternoon tea, again noted how we'd managed to find three new write-in species for the cumulative list.

The day was completed with a meal out in Trujillo, where a fine spread of local dishes and wine was the order of the day and made a pleasant alternative to the finca's international cuisine.

Fri 25 March – Embalse de Arrocampo and Monfragüe

A pre-breakfast wander round the finca for some, followed by a trip back up the motorway to the Embalse de Arrocampo, to see it 'properly'. The thick cloud and strong wind were certainly not in our favour though, and really kept activity down, with even the normally noisy Savi's Warblers not putting in a decent show (despite brief views of one and being heard by most). The first surprise was a herd of cows (water buffalo?) which obviously thought that it was migration time and swam right across the reservoir before climbing out and walking onto the road on the other side. A very brief fly-by Common Sandpiper was the only one all week, but much better were a couple of Purple Herons which finally showed in flight, but the Purple Swamp-hens kept their heads well and truly down in the vegetation, despite giving reasonable sightings. Marsh Harriers and Black Kites were very much in evidence.

We moved along to another, in theory better spot, where a Purple Swamp-hen plus its black chick showed only briefly for a few, but things improved when a Squacco Heron flew up from a pond and then came down in view (and we later watched it at length), and two others came up in flight beyond. Teal and Black-winged Stilts held court in one pool, a Kingfisher sped past and a Reed Bunting (the latest ever recorded in Extremadura, I've found out today) sat quietly ripping apart a reedmace head in full view of all. I was about to pull up a plastic sheet to see if there was anything underneath when the cry went up from Joy to take care as there was an orchid almost right beside it. One of a number of smart Sawfly Orchids in a damp patch of soil and grass on the edge of this old rubbish dump.

We tried our luck at a third area, the one we'd visited a few days before, but again no luck with small raptors, so as it was getting really late, we headed back to a local town for a drink before lunch. Darren and his group were just walking back beside the first bit of reservoir when I beeped to 'say hello', and they flagged us down – for a Spotted Crake. Despite being very tricky, it picked its way through the vegetation bordering the reservoir, but not before a female Little Bittern, which neither group had seen, did the same. While trying to get these in scopes for most of the party, an otter stuck its head up twice in quick succession, first in Russell's view, then in Darren's, but not before flushing the crake, which we could not refind, despite just stopping and having lunch here.

Darren's group moved off and returned to Monfragüe, leaving us to contemplate the reedmace where the birds had been seen, and while I then tried to get a couple of photos of Iberian Blue-tailed Damselflies, I was suddenly aware of a 'prooping' call way above us. Bee-eaters! A little party of at least nine birds raced through way overhead on the strong wind, fortunately being seen by a few.

Hmm. What to do? We decided to follow suit, also hoping that the road works in the park would be 'frozen' on Easter Friday. And so it was, and we were treated to excellent views of the Spanish Imperial Eagles again, this time from a different viewpoint, which turned out to be perfect when both eagles flew out, one gave chase to a Black Kite which dropped some food it was carrying, and the eagle dropped like a stone after it, just missing catching it in flight! Dropping to the ground, it retrieved the food, and both then flew across and perched on the ground among the trees for a few moments – a fabulous sight. We eventually pulled ourselves away from these birds and went to take a look again at the Eagle Owls, which showed very little given the cool conditions, but just sat and took in the scene.

After trying to leave Joy and Patricia behind (!) we drove through to Villareal de San Carlos for a comfort stop, where the Easter crowds were a real shock, but a pair of Egyptian Vultures and a distant adult Bonelli's Eagle were good recompense.

Continuing again we stopped for the last time at the main bridge, and after several minutes of waiting, a distant Alpine Swift streaked across the sky. More waiting saw another much closer, which passed just under the bridge and disappeared, so while we hoped for more, we content ourselves with a bit of raptor-watching, including Short-toed and no less than three Booted Eagles, including a nice mixed pair of pale and dark phase birds.

The drive back was uneventful, though late, and after an early dinner, most of us headed up to Trujillo to watch the main Easter procession through the streets. The different brotherhoods were wearing their different robes, though the long pointed hats give the whole thing a very eerie and slightly unnerving feel, having been like this for centuries. Fortunately we caught the end of the procession and after half an hour had had quite enough. Well worth seeing.

Egyptian vultures and a pale phase booted eagle



Sat 26 March – Extremadura to Madrid

The plan was to go out at 7 a.m. unless it was raining. Unfortunately, it was raining lightly and very cloudy and neither Russell nor I went out to take the assembled half-a-dozen... Breakfast was then taken at the normal time and after loading up we did go to try and see our goal: Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. While this was a real long shot, we went out to the most likely site, and despite stopping and scanning a couple of times, nothing was showing except a number of Calandra Larks. We were just reaching our last site when a small flock of fast-moving birds broke the horizon, wheeled round and came in to land just over the ridge. We moved on, checking one gulley, then on to the next, and last, there on the ground and looking right at us were 16 superb Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Fantastic, and when they relaxed, everyone was able to get out and watch them through the telescope. We were also able to contemplate a small group of flying Great Bustards, a larger group of Little Bustards, several elegant Montagu's Harriers hunting over the fields and as we left, even a Great Spotted Cuckoo flying along the road in front before landing in a tree off to one side!

My bus topped in Trujillo to pick up last minute 'goodies' and we eventually caught up Russell's van c. 30 minutes before lunch, and 15 minutes before a Black-shouldered Kite flew out of the dehesa and across a little pond off to one side as we sped along the motorway. Obviously not the best of views, but somehow gratifying to know that they are still out there...

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We would like to pass on our thanks for making this such an easy trip to lead, with a tremendous rapport among the group. I would also like to thank you for coping with my rapid-fire commentaries and 'over-enthusiasm' in the field, but as it was my first trip of the year in the area, I was really fired-up! The remarkable range of species we saw in total really was the exception rather than the rule, but you'll all need to come back again to see those birds we didn't manage to see, and the later spring flowers, of course which were unseasonably late this year.

With very best wishes,

John Muddeman (www.iberianwildlife.com)



Systematic Lists – Birds

A summary of sightings contributed by the whole group at the daily 'call over'.

Little grebe	Regularly recorded on small roadside pools within the plains and on some of the larger water bodies, maximum of seven on any one day.
Great crested grebe	Frequent on larger water bodies – up to twenty-five on Embalse de Sierra Brava and six at Embalse del Tozo.
Black-necked grebe	At least seven at Embalse de Sierra Brava.
Cormorant	Recorded from most of the larger water bodies and rivers in small numbers with a maximum of c150 passing over at Monfragüe on the 21 st .
Little bittern	A single bird amongst the reeds at Embalse de Arrocampo was the only sighting.
Squacco heron	Up to three seen well close to Embalse de Arrocampo.
Cattle egret	The commonest egret with ‘tens’ running into ‘hundreds’ recorded on many days. Found in all habitats including the more arid plains.
Little egret	Much less common than cattle egret with a maximum of no more than two on any one day.
Grey heron	Recorded on most days in small numbers with a maximum of six at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Purple heron	Up to six seen well at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Black stork	One of the highlights of our visits to the Parque Natural de Monfragüe with up to four birds, including an occupied nest.
White stork	For many <i>the</i> bird of Extremadura. Few will forget the sights and sounds of the many hundreds of birds that we saw during our stay.
Spoonbill	Two at Embalse del Tozo.
Greylag goose	A single bird at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Bald ibis	The extraordinary sighting of a single immature bird on a church roof at Trujillo still seems unlikely!
Wigeon	Three at Embalse del Tozo were the only sightings of what is a ‘wintering’ species here.
Gadwall	Recorded from a number of water bodies including those within the plains, maximum number recorded estimated at fifty.
Teal	Small numbers seen on pools within the plains and on some of the larger water bodies, maximum 20 at Embalse del Tozo.
Mallard	The common duck of the plains’ pools, reservoirs, rivers and within the ricefields. Recorded in ‘tens’ on most days.
Pintail	Four at Embalse del Tozo
Garganey	A single fine male at Embalse del Tozo.
Shoveler	Up to six on Embalse de Sierra Brava and eight at Embalse del Tozo.
Pochard	Eight on a pool within the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
Tufted duck	Seven with the pochard.
Black-shouldered kite	A single bird seen briefly from the highway, and at speed, as we returned towards Madrid airport!
Black kite	Daily sightings with estimates of in excess of fifty birds on the best days.
Red kite	Less common than black kite with an estimate of thirty birds on the best day (day 4), generally five – fifteen birds daily.
Egyptian vulture	Frequent at Monfragüe, the Deleitosa raptor feeding station and on the plains, with up to twenty birds on the best day (day 5).
Griffon vulture	Widespread and common with an estimated 200+ birds on the best day (day 3)! Fine sightings at Monfragüe, including many on nests and good examples of their distinctive ‘stacking’ display flights.
Black vulture	Frequent in the plains, at Monfragüe and at the Deleitosa raptor feeding station. An estimated 100 birds on our best day (day 5).

Short-toed eagle	Seen in a range of habitats on four days with a maximum of five birds in any one day.
Montagu's harrier	Up to six in favoured places within the Santa Marta de Magasca plains.
Marsh harrier	Up to eight birds in the ricefield areas near Madrigalejo and occasional birds elsewhere, especially at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Hen harrier	A single 'ringtail' (adult female or juvenile male) in the plains.
Sparrowhawk	A single bird flew up an irrigation channel within the ricefields near Vegas Altas, the only sighting.
Common buzzard	Daily with an estimated maximum of thirty birds on the best day (day 4), generally ten – fifteen birds.
Spanish imperial eagle	A fine pair complete with a nest, at Monfragüe, was one of the many highlights of the trip. Other sightings within the plains.
Golden eagle	Three birds seen during our travels through the various plains around Santa Marta de Magasca.
Bonelli's eagle	Several sightings at Monfragüe, in the plains and by the Rio Tozo, maximum in any one day of three birds.
Booted eagle	Up to five birds in any one day, largely pale-phased.
Lesser kestrel	The delightful small raptor of the towns and plains, including really close views of breeding birds at the bullring in Trujillo. 'Tens' of birds on the best day.
Common kestrel	Daily but in much smaller numbers than lesser kestrel, with our best estimate being a cautious fifteen!
Peregrine	A single bird at Cabanas de Castillo was the only sighting.
Red-legged partridge	A few on most days, with a maximum of ten in the plains close to Santa Marta de Magasca.
Quail	A single bird heard calling in the Zorita area.
Water rail	Single birds heard on two days.
Spotted crake	A single bird lurking in the reeds at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Moorhen	Daily in small numbers but an estimate of up to eighty birds on day 1 – found on both small and larger water bodies as well as in the ricefields.
Purple gallinule	Excellent views of five birds in the marshes of Embalse de Arrocampo at Almaraz.
Coot	Numbers running into 'tens' at the Embalse de Sierra Brava, elsewhere scarcer.
Little bustard	At least eighty, both in flight and on the ground, in the plains to the south of Santa Marta de Magasca.
Great bustard	Scattered groups in agricultural land and the plains with an estimated total of 80 on day 2.
Stone-curlew	Three seen within the Zorita plains.
Black-winged stilt	Regularly in small numbers in roadside pools with up to 30 at Embalse del Tozo.
Little ringed plover	Several birds seen on three days, usually on river shingles.
Golden plover	Up to 150 on day 2 in the Zorita plains, with lapwings.
Lapwing	Scattered throughout the plains in moderate numbers with 'hundreds' on day 4.
Jack snipe	A single bird flushed from a pool in the ricefields area.
Common snipe	Birds flushed from a number of pools, riversides and reservoirs with a maximum of ten at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Black-tailed godwit	A single bird by a pool near Santa Marta de Magasca.

Spotted redshank	Single birds by a pool in the plains and at Embalse del Tozo.
Greenshank	Up to eight birds at Embalse del Tozo.
Green sandpiper	Frequently flushed from riverbanks and small pools in small numbers, maximum five in any one day.
Wood sandpiper	Two at Embalse del Tozo.
Common sandpiper	A single at Embalse de Arrocampo was surprisingly the only sighting.
Black-headed gull	Very scarce with few sightings and a maximum of only fifteen, at Embalse del Tozo.
Lesser black-backed gull	‘Tens’ recorded on several days, often passing over high and if not calling easily overlooked.
Yellow-legged gull	Two at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Black-bellied sandgrouse	Small groups seen flying over amounting to c27 birds in the stony Zorita plains and up to five in the plains of Santa Marta de Magasca.
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	Twelve seen well amongst stony agricultural plains near Santa Marta de Magasca.
Rock dove/feral pigeon	Widespread and common.
Woodpigeon	Daily in small numbers, maximum of only ten.
Collared dove	Daily in small numbers, around the Finca and other habitation.
Great spotted cuckoo	Occasional within the plains, maximum of two.
Common cuckoo	Single birds were heard calling on three days and one sighted.
Scops owl	Birds could be heard calling close to the Finca on most nights.
Eagle owl	An adult, complete with a nest with two young, tested our powers of observation at Monfragüe.
Short-eared owl	A single bird was seen over the plains near Zorita.
Little owl	Single birds were seen or heard on two days.
Common swift	Occasional, especially at Trujillo, with up to five birds.
Pallid swift	Up to an estimated fifty birds were seen overhead at Trujillo on our ‘town day’.
Alpine swift	Up to ten were seen in the Monfragüe area.
Kingfisher	One – three birds on several days, by rivers and at Arrocampo.
Bee-eater	Nine flying over calling, very high, at Arrocampo.
Hoopoe	A characteristic bird of the grounds of the Finca in particular but also seen, and especially heard, in lots of other places, maximum ten in any one day.
Great spotted woodpecker	Single birds seen on two days, wooded riversides.
Calandra lark	A characteristic species of the plains – birds heard singing and seen displaying on many occasions. On our best day we saw at least fifteen.
Short-toed lark	A single bird singing in the plains near Santa Marta de Magasca was the only sighting.
Crested lark	A widespread and common species, probably running into ‘hundreds’ on some days.
Thekla lark	Up to five seen on several days in open dehesa.
Woodlark	Single birds singing on three days.
Sand martin	Small numbers at several wetland sites, especially at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Crag martin	A common bird of the hill country with ‘tens’ on several days.
Swallow	Widespread and common in all habitats.
Red-rumped swallow	Frequent in small numbers by rivers, a few around the Finca, within Monfragüe and elsewhere; maximum ten in any one day.

House martin	Common ('tens'), especially around habitation and over large water bodies.
Meadow pipit	Frequent in a range of habitats with 'tens' on many days.
Water pipit	A single bird on one day, by the Rio Almonte.
Grey wagtail	One or two birds by fast flowing rivers, such as the Rio Almonte, on several days.
White wagtail	Frequent in moderate numbers ('tens') by rivers and around water bodies.
Wren	Very small numbers, largely around the Finca and in hill country.
Dunnock	Occasional singles at the Finca.
Alpine accentor	Two at Cabanas de Castillo.
Robin	Scarce, occasional singles only.
Black redstart	Occasional at the Finca, in Trujillo, at Monfragüe and at Cabanas de Castillo, maximum ten in any one day.
Stonechat	Common by roadsides, where often perched on wires, 'tens' on some days.
Northern wheatear	A single bird on two days – in the plains.
Black-eared wheatear	Two stunning males in stony agricultural land in the plains.
Black wheatear	Two at Cabanas de Castillo.
Blue rock thrush	Excellent sightings of several birds, especially at Monfragüe.
Blackbird	Widespread and common around the Finca, in hill country and in the dehesa.
Song thrush	Small numbers around the Finca in particular, scarce elsewhere.
Mistle thrush	A single bird at the Finca.
Cetti's warbler	Small numbers heard but rarely seen in a variety of wet situations.
Fan-tailed warbler	Not uncommon in the ricefields around Vegas Altas.
Savi's warbler	A single heard in song and briefly seen at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Sedge warbler	Singles at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Reed warbler	A single bird heard singing at Embalse de Arrocampo.
Subalpine warbler	Splendid views of males at Monfragüe and Cabanas de Castillo.
Sardinian warbler	The frequent warbler of scrub, dehesa and wooded hillsides but more often heard than seen..
Blackcap	Common around the Finca on a daily basis, less so elsewhere.
Willow warbler	A few on two days, birds only just starting to arrive.
Chiffchaff	Widespread and frequent in small numbers, maximum in any one day ten.
Long-tailed tit	Up to four, on three days.
Blue tit	Daily in small numbers.
Great tit	Daily, more frequent than blue tit.
Short-toed treecreeper	Up to three, almost daily, especially at the Finca where often found in the orchards.
Southern grey shrike	A frequent bird of roadside stops in the plains, often seen perching on wires, maximum ten in any one day.
Woodchat shrike	Up to seven seen from roadsides, like the previous species often perching on fences.
Jay	A single on one day only.
Azure-winged magpie	Often abundant in the dehesa and very common around the Finca – another characteristic bird of Extremadura.
Magpie	Widespread and abundant in all habitats.
Chough	Two seen well at Cabanas de Castillo.

Jackdaw	Widespread and abundant.
Raven	Frequent in the hills and plains, maximum thirty-five in any one day.
Spotless starling	Widespread and often abundant.
House sparrow	Ditto
Spanish sparrow	Easily overlooked amongst the house sparrows but often common in agricultural land such as ricefields. Often nesting in white storks nests, such as at the Finca.
Tree sparrow	Three seen on one day, in agricultural land near Zorita.
Common waxbill	Up to a dozen in the area of the Madrigalejo ricefields
Red avadavat	Up to a ten in the area of the Madrigalejo ricefields
Chaffinch	Widespread, common in the hills, maximum running into 'tens' on some days.
Serin	A widespread and noisy small finch, well distributed throughout the area.
Greenfinch	1 – 2 occasionally, surprisingly unobtrusive.
Goldfinch	A widespread and very common roadside bird, 'tens' on all days.
Linnet	Occasional – maximum of forty in any one day.
Hawfinch	Often seen and heard passing over at the Finca. Good sightings of up to twenty birds at Monfragüe.
Cirl bunting	Up to four birds on day 5.
Rock bunting	Excellent sightings of this handsome bird at Monfragüe.
Reed bunting	A single bird near Embalse de Arrocampo was the only sighting of this wintering species.
Corn bunting	Widespread and abundant, especially on the plains, where 'hundreds' were recorded on some days.

Mammals

Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
Western hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus algirus</i>
Iberian hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>
Mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>
Iberian mole	<i>Talpa sp.</i>

Reptiles and amphibians

Spanish terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>
Spanish psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus hispanicus</i>
Moorish gecko	<i>Tarentola mauretanica</i>
Stripeless tree frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>
Natterjack toad	<i>Bufo calamita</i>
Spanish pool frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>

Butterflies

Swallowtail
Small white
Western dappled white
Clouded yellow
Cleopatra (*right*)
Large tortoiseshell
Red admiral
Small heath
Wall brown
Provence hairstreak
Small copper
Brown argus



Other invertebrates

Iberian blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ischnura graellsii</i>
Vagrant emperor dragonfly	<i>Hemianax ephippiger</i>
Rhinoceros beetle	<i>Copris lunaris</i>
A bee-fly	<i>Bombyliidae sp</i>
Pine processionary moth	<i>Thaumetopoea pityocampa</i>

Plants – a list of the more obvious species

(numbers on the right refer to Blamey and Grey-Wilson's *Mediterranean Wild Flowers*)

Pinaceae	<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Stone/Umbrella Pine	(3)
Cupressaceae	<i>Juniperus communis</i>	Common Juniper	(13)
Fagaceae	<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	Evergreen Oak	(26)
	<i>Quercus suber</i>	Cork Oak	(27)
Ulmaceae	<i>Ulmus sp</i>	Elm	
Urticaceae	<i>Urtica membranacea</i>	Membranous Nettle	(49)
Caryophyllaceae	<i>Paronychia argentea</i>	Paronychia	(136)
	<i>Moenchia erecta</i>	Upright Chickweed	
Ranunculaceae	<i>Ranunculus sp</i>	Water Crowfoot sp	
Fumariaceae	<i>Fumaria capreolata</i>	Ramping Fumitory	(303)
Crassulaceae	<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>	Navelwort	(396)
Saxifragaceae	<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>	Meadow Saxifrage	
Leguminosae	<i>Cercis siliquastrum</i>	Judas Tree	(430)
	<i>Acacia dealbata</i>	Silver Wattle	(432)
	<i>Adenocarpus argyrophyllus</i>	Spanish Adenocarpus	
	<i>Cytisus multiflorus</i>	White Broom	
	<i>Cytisus scoparius</i>	Broom	(456)
	<i>Lupinus sp</i>	Lupin	
	<i>Astragalus lusitanicus</i>	Iberian Milk Vetch	(504)
	<i>Medicago arabica</i>	Spotted Medick	(623)
Geraniaceae	<i>Vicia lutea</i>	Yellow Vetch	
	<i>Geranium molle</i>	Dove's-foot Cranesbill	(741)
	<i>Geranium lucidum</i>	Shiny Cranes-bill	(749)
	<i>Erodium botrys</i>	Storks-bill sp	(758)
Violaceae	<i>Viola kitabeliana</i>	Dwarf Pansy	(931)
Cistaceae	<i>Cistus albidus</i>	Grey-leaved Cistus	(961)
	<i>Cistus ladanifer</i>	Gum Cistus	(971)
Cactaceae	<i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i>	Prickly Pear Cactus	(1040)
Umbelliferae	<i>Smyrniium perfoliatum</i>	Perfoliate Alexanders	(1088)
	<i>Ferula communis</i>	Giant Fennel	(1141)
Ericaceae	<i>Arbutus unedo</i>	Strawberry Tree	(1176)
	<i>Erica arborea</i>	Tree Heath	(1178)
	<i>Erica lusitanica</i>	Portuguese Heath	(1179)
Oleaceae	<i>Olea europaea</i>	Olive	(1248)
Boraginaceae	<i>Anchusa undulata</i>	Undulate Anchusa	(1406)
	<i>Myosotis ramossima</i>	Early Forget-me-not	
Labiatae	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	Rosemary	(1526)
	<i>Lavandula stoechas</i>	French Lavender	(1528)
	<i>Salvia verbenaca</i>	Wild Clary	(1545)
Scrophulariceae	<i>Linaria amethystea</i>	Amethyst Toadflax	

Compositae	<i>Bellis annua</i>	Annual Daisy	(1791)
	<i>Bellis sylvestris</i> (1793)	Southern Daisy	
	<i>Calendula arvensis</i>	Field Marigold	(1908)
	<i>Silybum marianum</i>	Milk Thistle	(1982)
	<i>Urospermum dalecampii</i>	Urospermum	(2039)
Liliaceae	<i>Asphodelus aestivus</i>	Common Asphodel	(2089)
	<i>Gagea elliptica</i>	Yellow star of Bethlehem	(2106)
	<i>Urginea maritime</i>	Sea Squill	(2163)
	<i>Muscari comosum</i>	Tassel Hyacinth	(2201)
	<i>Ruscus aculeatus</i>	Butchers Broom	(2219)
	<i>Narcissus triandrus papyraceus</i>	Angel's Tears	
	<i>Narcissus bulbocodium</i>	Hoop-petticoat Narcissus	(2281)
Iridaceae	<i>Gynandris sisyinchium</i>	Barbary Nut	(2305)
	<i>Romelea ramiflora gaditana</i>	Sand Crocus	(2316a)
Orchidaceae	<i>Orchis morio subsp. champagneuxii</i>	Champagne Orchid	(2403b)
	<i>Orchis lactea</i>	Milky Orchid	(2408)
	<i>Ophrys tenthredinifera</i>	Sawfly Orchid	(2442)



Dear friends of Honey Guide and travelers.

I hope that your trip finally was successfully and whit a very large list of birding. I want to give you a thanks for your patient whit my poor English and for your contribution in order to support our conservation programs.

The first action that we did whit this money was a patrol campaign in bad situation electric lanes. One of this patrol discovered a dead point to Great Bustard in Sierra de Fuentes plains. They found four dead bodies of great bustards crashed in lines. We denounced this problem in press and sent to electric company a petition letter. Last week, electric company sent us his compromise to mark all of this electric line whit visual elements to birds.

Down, we send you a photos of great bustards crashed in electric line, discovered in Sierra de Fuentes plains.

Congratulations for your first conservation aim successfully in Extremadura.

Best regards

Marce

Conservation officer of SEO/BirdLife in Extremadura

