

## Extremadura - 4th to 10th May 2006

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The benefits of an early start to Heathrow, a BA flight spot on time and prompt disembarkation were irritatingly countered by an hour's wait for baggage at Madrid's Barajas airport and a further hour for the Hertz agent to issue us with our car! Though it felt more like driving a tractor at first a Kia Sorrento a 4WD vehicle was necessary for the rough tracks we anticipated (and met). A two hour drive, in thick mist on the south side of the mountains, took us to the Sierra de Gredos, where we were to stay a night at the pleasant Parador.

Much of our itinerary was based on John Muddeman's A birdwatching guide to Extremadura. The maps in the book are poor and one should not rely on road numbers given! Roads can have several different numbers and those given in the book often differ from those on the ground, which may differ from those on road maps. It is important to verify routes with village names etc.

En route from Madrid the motorway (A5) provided a sparse but pleasant range of species including White Stork, Cattle Egret, Common Crane, Crested Lark, Spotless Starling, Spanish and House Sparrows. The road into the mountains from the motorway added Red-rumped Swallow and Azure-winged Magpie.

### Sierra de Gredos

Afternoon 4th May; weather showery, c 15C. The promised Citril Finches were not obvious in the car park of the parador, which did, however, boast Crag Martin and Black Redstart on its walls. We left to take a short drive west a few km then south toward the car park for the walking circuit of the Gredos peaks. Because of the poor weather, we walked around along wooded stream banks and farmland that afternoon. Bonelli's Warblers were singing stridently in any patch of woodland; notably warmer brown than the autumn vagrants in the UK. Green and Great spotted Woodpeckers, Pied Flycatcher, Firecrest, Nuthatch and Three-toed Treecreeper (with a much louder song than we are used to with our Treecreeper) were also in the woods. Rock Bunting was the common bunting in the area, even where there were few rocks. Ortolan Bunting was difficult to find, though one was heard singing and seen briefly. Birds of prey seen here were Short toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Red Kite, Black Kite, Kestrel, Hobby. Greenfinch, Serin, Siskin, but still no Citril Finch by the end of the day.

Frustrated by this, some of us prowled the hotel car park early the next morning, eventually hearing and seeing a Citril Finch on one of the pines. We went up to the car park at the end of the road into the mountains, stopping in various habitats of the way, adding Little Egret, Woodlark, Woodchat Shrike, Roller, Bee-eater and the Spanish race of the Yellow Wagtail to the birds of the previous day. The walk from the car park into mountains was delightful: Griffon and Black Vultures, Booted Eagle, Black and Red Kites; lots of Skylarks, Thekla Lark, a Water Pipit, Chough and the highlight half a dozen Bluethroats (spotless but assumed White) singing in the brush. We should have spent longer here, but had to move on to Trujillo in the afternoon.

On our return journey to Madrid the next week, we spent a few hours on the southern slopes of the Gredos at 400-500m. The woodland and farmland provided excellent views of Honey Buzzards, numerous Golden Orioles, Bee-eaters and a Citril Finch.

## Trujillo

We stayed five nights at the Posada dos Orillas in the beautiful old centre of Trujillo. Not the cheapest of hotels, but excellent rooms, disturbed only by the clacking of White Storks and yells of Lesser Kestrels, both species nesting on the buildings around the Plaza Mayor.

In the gardens around the town were Sardinian Warbler, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Tree Sparrow, Hoopoe, Bee-eater, Red-rumped and Barn Swallows. Amongst the Common Swifts around the bull ring were a small number of Pallid Swifts. Black Kite were the commonest large raptor; Kestrel and Lesser Kestrel the common smaller birds of prey. A Golden Eagle flying over a spine of low hills just west of the town was a surprise.

From Trujillo, we took a number of trips around the countryside to see the main habitats: open cork forest; rolling savannah with cattle and sheep, spectacularly covered in wildflowers in May; agricultural areas mostly with wheat and some rice paddies. These do not always correspond with the descriptions in *Birding in Extremadura* as the state of grazing of pastures and the position of crops can vary from year to year. There are numerous small valleys with streams or dips with ponds these were often worth stopping to check. At one close to Trujillo a Melodious Warbler was singing its heart out sitting on the outside of a bush through the middle of the day.

## Savannah

In several places we saw Great Bustard and Little Bustard on the savannah; 13 in the largest party of Great Bustard, a huge bird and powerful flyer. Parties of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were seen occasionally, the best spot being a watering hole off a track running N from the EX 373 to Monroy, 10 km from its junction with the EX208/N524 north of Trujillo. This spot was also good for Stone Curlew. Crested Larks were the predominant lark species, with Short-toed Lark, numerous Calandra Lark, and the troublesome Thekla Lark also seen here. Tawny Pipit was relatively scarce on the savannah and Corn Bunting was ubiquitous. Quail were occasionally heard calling. Southern Grey Shrike were common along roadsides throughout the region.

Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vultures patrol the savannah and at one point we saw perhaps a hundred birds collecting on the ground around something we could not see. Black Kites everywhere, but the Black-shouldered Kite proved totally elusive. Montagues Harrier was seen in several places, particularly numerous on the EX373 from Trujillo to Monroy. We saw one Marsh Harrier in the same area. Little Owls were occasionally seen on roadside posts.

## Wetland

We visited little wet land: a reservoir SE of Zorita (Embalse de Sierra Brava) and rice paddies near Vegas Altas. Islands on the reservoir had Black necked, Great Crested and Little Grebes, Red Crested Pochard, Black Winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plover, Gull Billed Tern, Little Tern breeding. A roadside pond with a reedbed had a group of Great Reed Warbler. Rice paddies, which have to be searched for as the flooding is moved from year to year, had a similar range of species. The area around Vegas Altas was recommended for Black Shouldered Kite, but they escaped us. Cetti's Warbler and Zitting Cisticola were heard in several places.

## Monfrague

The Monfrague national park has a series of bird-watching honey pots along the EX208 and CC911. Parking spots, often with hides and explanatory notice boards, look on to rock outcrops with colonies of Griffon and Black Vultures, nests of Black Stork, Spanish Imperial Eagle (excellent views) and Eagle Owl (we only saw the chick).

The vertiginous top of the castello at the Santuario de Monfrague is described as a good vantage point for surveying the region and seeing raptors from above. We spent some hours here searching the swifts: numerous Common Swifts, a few Alpine Swifts, but no White Rumped. Local birdwatchers told us that they are now extremely rare, though I understand that Dave Cotteridge saw some the following week. Perhaps due to the air conditions, we saw relatively few raptors from the castello, but elsewhere around the park we saw Short toed Eagle, Booted Eagle (a common bird everywhere) and a rather distant Bonelli's Eagle, as well as Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vultures.

A marked trail from the park centre at Villareal de San Carlos took us through some of most spectacular wildflower meadows I have seen and through woodland with large numbers of Woodchat Shrike singing and displaying. Here, the Nightingale song was complemented by Orphean Warbler. Subalpine Warbler was to be seen in the cistus scrub and Sardinian Warbler in several scrubby habitats.

We saw 140 species in the six days, including more raptors than I have seen anywhere and plenty of bustards, the iconic birds of the plains. Birds hoped for but missed: White Rumped Swift, Black Shouldered Kite, Black Bellied Sandgrouse and lots of other less special species that are to be found in the area. Overall an excellent trip in an area with perhaps the greatest avian diversity in western Europe. If I did it again, I would (a) stay longer - there were many areas we simply had no time to visit; (b) stay at least two nights in the Gredos and in the Monfrague park; (c) get up earlier in the morning!

- Black necked Grebe
- Little Grebe
- Great Crested Grebe
- Cormorant
- Cattle Egret
- Little Egret
- Grey Heron
- Purple Heron
- White Stork
- Black Stork
- Shelduck
- Mallard
- Red Crested Pochard
- Griffon Vulture
- Black Vulture
- Egyptian Vulture
- Golden Eagle
- Spanish Imperial Eagle
- Short toed Eagle
- Booted Eagle
- Bonelli's Eagle

- Red Kite
- Black Kite
- Marsh Harrier
- Montagu's Harrier
- Common Buzzard
- Honey Buzzard
- Sparrowhawk
- Kestrel
- Lesser Kestrel
- Hobby
- Red legged Partridge
- Quail
- Moorhen
- Coot
- Crane
- Great Bustard
- Little Bustard
- Black winged Stilt
- Stone Curlew
- Collared Pratincole
- Little Ringed Plover
- Lapwing
- Common Sandpiper
- Black headed Gull
- Little Tern
- Gull billed Tern
- Pin tailed Sandgrouse
- Rock Dove
- Woodpigeon
- Collared Dove
- Turtle Dove
- Cuckoo
- Great Spotted Cuckoo
- Little Owl
- Eagle Owl
- Barn Owl
- Common Swift
- Alpine Swift
- Pallid Swift
- Hoopoe
- Bee-eater
- Rollor
- Green Woodpecker
- Great Spotted Woodpecker
- Skylark
- Crested Lark
- Thekla Lark
- Woodlark
- Short toed Lark
- Calandra Lark
- Crag Martin

- Sand Martin
- Barn Swallow
- Red rumped Swallow
- House Martin
- Tawny Pipit
- Water Pipit
- White Wagtail
- Yellow Wagtail
- Grey Wagtail
- Wren
- Dunnock
- Robin
- Nightingale
- Bluethroat
- Black Redstart
- Northern Wheatear
- Stonechat
- Blue Rock Thrush
- Mistle Thrush
- Blackbird
- Blackcap
- Orphean Warbler
- Sardinian Warbler
- Whitethroat
- Subalpine Warbler
- Zitting Cisticola
- Cetti's Warbler
- Great Reed Warbler
- Melodious Warbler
- Bonelli's Warbler
- Firecrest
- Spotted Flycatcher
- Pied Flycatcher
- Great Tit
- Coal Tit
- Blue Tit
- Long Tailed Tit
- Nuthatch
- Short toed Treecreeper
- Woodchat Shrike
- Southern Grey Shrike
- Azure winged Magpie
- Magpie
- Jay
- Jackdaw
- Chough
- Carrion Crow
- Raven
- Spotless Starling
- Golden Oriole
- House Sparrow

- Spanish Sparrow
- Tree Sparrow
- Rock Sparrow
- Linnet
- Goldfinch
- Greenfinch
- Siskin
- Serin
- Citril Finch
- Chaffinch
- Hawfinch
- Reed Bunting
- Ortolan Bunting
- Cirl Bunting
- Corn Bunting
- Rock Bunting

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