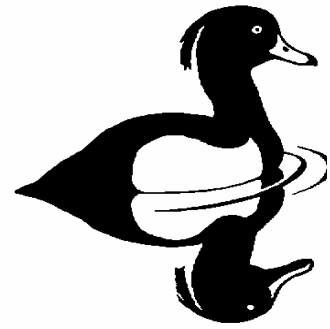


ROC Newsletter

Winter 2006/2007

No 36



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Introduction

May I start by hoping that you had a very enjoyable Christmas and New Year and that 2007 will be a good year for all. My new year was spent in Norfolk, enjoying some fine walks around the Broads, with regular sightings of Marsh Harriers and skeins of Pink Footed Geese (along with the odd pause for plentiful supplies of good food and drink!). Also of interest were the many pairs of Egyptian Geese that we seemed to see wherever we walked – I had not realised quite how widespread they have become.

Now back in the land of reality, with Christmas decorations duly stowed back in the loft and all the empty bottles and Christmas trees dutifully recycled, we can all look forward to the 60th Anniversary of the Club. It says a lot for our mutual love of birds that the Club has lasted and prospered for so long (only 40 more years until the centenary !). I hope that many of you will be able to attend the anniversary dinner on the 9th of March – please see the item below for further information about this event and register your interest as soon as possible.

Please remember to check your programme cards and the Web site for other upcoming indoor and outdoor events. Just to mention a few - on Sunday 21st January we have a coach going to Welney WWT, on Wednesday 21st March there is the annual Photographic Competition and in June there is a long weekend trip to the North East (including the Farne Islands). Further details about these events can be found later in this newsletter.

Also, please don't forget that I am always on the look out for newsletter items that will be of interest to other club members. The Spring newsletter should go out around the end of March, so can I ask that any contributions reach me by Friday 23rd March.

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Thanks go to all contributors to this newsletter, with most illustrations courtesy of Kingfisher Publications plc.

ROC 60th Anniversary – Dinner on March 9th

Way back on 18th February 1947 the inaugural meeting of the ROC took place in Reading and so, to commemorate the Club's 60th year, a dinner (with speakers) will be held at Caversham Heath Golf Club on the evening of 9th March 2007.



All ROC members and their partners are welcome.

There will be a choice of menu, with dinner starting at 7.45 p.m. (a bar will be available from 7 p.m. for pre-dinner drinks). Gentlemen are requested to wear jacket and tie. There is ample parking at the Golf Club, which is less than two miles from Caversham Bridge (more detailed directions will be available nearer the time).

What we need now is your support and hence we are looking for confirmation of your attendance no later than 7th February 2007 (our third indoor meeting of 2007), but would like it earlier if possible.

The cost of the dinner will be £25 per person and we will ask for payment nearer the date.

To book your place, please contact :-

John Roberts, 71, Kidmore Road, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7NQ, (tel. 0118 9482137)

or Ted Rogers (tel. 01344 883237, email ted.rogers@btinternet.com)

or Ray Reedman (tel. 0118 9864338, email meander2@hotmail.com)

ROC Coach Trip to Welney WWT

We have a coach trip going to Welney WWT Reserve on Sunday January 21st. A great chance to see the wintering wild swans and wildfowl. The coach will leave Reading University (Whiteknights Road) at 8.00am, with a further pick at Bray Wick (Hibbert Road) at 8.30am. Cost for the day will be £17, plus entry fee for non-members.

Please contact Ray Reedman (0118 986338) as soon as possible for further details and to reserve your place.

ROC Photographic Competition 2007 Rules

This year, 2007, we are offering 4 categories in our competition. These are:

- Best slide photograph of a bird (this can be a portrait or action shot)
- Best digiscoped bird (portrait or action shot)
- Best digital bird portrait
- Best digital bird action photograph



Each of the four categories will be judged and winners chosen by Gordon Langsbury. The meeting, on 21st March 2007 will then, on a show of hands, choose the overall winner who will win the Gordon Langsbury Cup, currently held by Mike Smith for his action shot of Mute Swans.

Overall rules

- 1) Photographs will be of birds only
- 2) The competition is open to paid up members of the ROC. New members may join on the night if they wish.
- 3) No more than four entries per category per entrant.
- 4) Entrants agree to winner and runner up photographs being displayed by the ROC on it's website and used for publicity purposes, at the Club's discretion. The ROC will make reasonable attempts to ensure acknowledgement is given to photographers whose work is used in this way.
- 5) Photographs will be judged on all factors including exposure, colour cast, focus, composition and form.
- 6) Photography related prizes (usually vouchers) will be given in all categories for first place and second place and the overall winner will also win the Gordon Langsbury Cup.

Digital section

- 1) Limited image manipulation is permissible but no cloning of the bird image itself. Accordingly, adjustment to exposure, sharpening, colour correction, sensor dust spotting and cropping and resizing is acceptable. It is not permissible to clone any part of bird images, or copy or pass off other people's work.
- 2) Images should be resized if possible to 1024x768 and 72dpi. Images of 900x600 @100dpi and 810x540 @ 72dpi may also be suitable. The images will be adapted by the ROC for presentation as well as possible but without responsibility for the results.
- 3) Closing date for entries is 7 March 2007. No changes or additions can be considered after that time. Images should be emailed to colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk or sent on a CD to his home address: Blakeney, St. Catherine's Road, Frimley Green, Surrey, GU16 9NP. Any questions please telephone 01252 837411.
- 4) The pictures will be placed in Microsoft Powerpoint and shown as a slide show. Portrait pictures will be expanded to full page height.

Mid-Week Walk Reminder

Please note that the mid-week walk in February will take place on the afternoon of the 8th (i.e. the 2nd Thursday of the month, not the usual 3rd). Meet at 2pm at the car park at Bury Down (SU480840) to look for owls and other wintering birds.

Dot Lincoln

Changing our Name to Berkshire Ornithological Club

Over the last few years there has been a lot of discussion about the county-wide role played by the ROC and recognising this in our name. The Club's membership comes from across the county of Berkshire: 60% of members live outside the greater Reading area, equally spread per head of population in East and West Berkshire. Berkshire is the Club's recording area; it produces *The Birds of Berkshire* Report; it manages the *The Birds of Berkshire* Conservation Fund.

So, last Autumn we held a postal ballot of all members on a change of name to "Berkshire Ornithological Club". The ballot result, announced at the AGM, was a clear mandate for the change, with 75% of members voting and 80% of votes in favour of Berkshire.

However, the Newbury and District Ornithological Club have expressed concern that such a change would disadvantage them. So, before proceeding with the formal resolution to change our name, we are discussing with the NDOC how we can allay their fears. We aim to put a formal resolution on the name to an EGM before the end of the current indoor meeting season.

Neil Bucknell, Renton Righelato

Some New Faces, Some Old – the Committee for 2007

After three very successful years as Chairman, Colin Wilson retired from the role and at the AGM in November, Neil Bucknell was elected our new chairman. Neil, who served his first three year spell in the chair ten or twelve years ago, brings a wealth of experience of the UK ornithological world and an enthusiasm for the Club and ornithology in Berkshire.

New members elected to the Committee are Ros Stanley, Andy Tomczykinski and Colin Wilson (who has also been appointed as Managing editor for the Birds of Berkshire reports and records database manager – a role he has actually been doing for the last year or so). There are three other elected members: Ruth Angus, Ray Reedman (also Programme Secretary) and Ted Rogers (also Newsletter editor). Brian Uttley, who has made an immense contribution to bird conservation around Reading, has retired as our Conservation Officer and John Lerpiniere appointed to the role. Marek Walford is our Webmaster and, together with Ted Rogers, Bill Nicoll is responsible for the programme of field trips. John Roberts continues as Treasurer and yours truly as Secretary.

Renton Righelato

Club Accounts to 30/9/06

Club funds stood at £8,823 with an excess of income in the year of £786. This was a pleasing outcome as approximately £2,300 had been expended on the 2003 report. It is anticipated that much of this cost will be recovered via sponsorship, sales and advertising. We encourage you to support our advertisers.

Our Conservation Fund, a separate account, stood at £4,459 and grants had been made to Newbury Ringing group (£200), Pang Valley (£600) and Moor Green (£600). From October 2006 the income from raffles at indoor meetings will go to the Conservation fund.

If you did not attend the AGM and want a copy of the Accounts, please contact me.

John Roberts (0118 9482137)

Carbon Balancing and the WLT

I have a son-in law very involved in the world of ecology, who for several years has chided me about flying abroad on birding holidays on the grounds that I am using up more than my share of the world's resources, especially if I fly twice in the same year. Up to now I have taken the attitude that for a good many years I had little opportunity for such activities and in my retirement years it was my turn to please myself.

Lately I have had a change of heart. First one of the tour groups I have used –Bird Holidays – sent me a catalogue and the information that to compensate for all the pollution and using up of resources that their business caused, the four directors were financing the purchasing, out of their own pockets, the regeneration over a period of 20years, of a piece of currently degraded rain forest in Ecuador ,through the World Land Trust (WLT). Now after a talk a year or two ago given to the ROC by our secretary I was vaguely aware of this organization but I have to admit that I thought of it as one of those worthy groups that would like our money but one cannot support them all.

Then in October Renton again talked of the work of this group. Carbon balancing was a subject in the news, and of our need to do something about saving the planet as individuals, as well as action by governments. Renton's information regarding the work in Ecuador (and elsewhere), saving threatened areas of rain forest, protecting the habitat of endangered species, weaning local people from tolerating illegal logging by providing

gainful employment as protectors of the reserve, and in eco- tourism, and more over, in parts of the world where an indigenous population exists, protecting their rights to continue their traditional way of life: all this was inspirational. Yes, I thought. This is something I must support, and " pay" my bit for all my flights abroad. I picked up a leaflet and at home entered www.worldlandtrust.org and found out how to donate and how to gift an acre of rainforest to a friend or relative. Another son – in law received an acre for his October birthday (he was delighted and has kept the information sent to him with his certificate to use himself) and my bird-watching brother is going to get one for Christmas ! Why don't you do the same? It will help ease your conscience about all those car journeys and flights in search of good birding. If you don't have access to a computer you can donate any amount or gift an acre for £25 by telephone: 01986 874422 or Lo-call (ie local rate charged) -0845 054 4422) .

Dot Lincoln

Birding, Carbon and Conservation.

At the Bird Fair last year, a keen Berkshire birder with whom I was discussing climate change told me, without a hint of irony, that he had to fly around the globe several times a year to tick off species before global warming drove them to extinction! My puritanical hackles rose, but, let's face it, we are all to some extent guilty. Bird-watching usually involves travel by car and many of us treat ourselves to one or two overseas trips a year. Some serious birders cover tens of thousands of miles a year chasing vagrants or rare endemics - I estimate that last months Long billed Murrelet in Devon was responsible for between 250 and 500 tonnes more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

There are basically two ways to reduce the impact of our emissions – create less carbon dioxide and remove more from the atmosphere. As individuals, we can create less by using the train, driving more slowly, car-sharing *etc.* We can cause more to be absorbed from the atmosphere by protecting and restoring forests and grasslands. We need to do both.

Transport accounts for a quarter of global carbon dioxide emissions. For every 1,000 miles, an average family car produces a quarter of a tonne of CO₂. Air travel is particularly costly in terms of emissions: a European return flight produces approximately half a tonne of CO₂ per person; an intercontinental flight 1.5 to 5 tonnes depending on class and distance.

The World Land Trust restores natural habitats as part of its biodiversity conservation work and by doing so takes carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. A hectare of forest lost releases many hundreds of tonnes of CO₂, a hectare restored, over twenty years or so, can absorb hundreds of tonnes. So, when you have reduced your carbon emissions as much as you can, with WLT you can "offset", or "balance" your carbon and at the same time conserve threatened habitats and species.

Balancing a mid size car (1.5 – 2.0 litre) costs around £20 per 10,000 miles. Offsetting flights costs around £4 per European economy return flight and £12 per intercontinental economy return flight. You can do this at www.carbonbalanced.org, contact the World Land Trust (phone 01986 874222; go to www.worldlandtrust.org) or give me a call.

Renton Righelato
World Land Trust
Mobile: 0787 981 2564

Editor's Note: Of course, one of the other options is not to make the journey at all – e.g. by not travelling to see that Long billed Murrelet I reckon I avoided putting some 200 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Now there's a thought.

Subscriptions 2006-2007

This is to remind members that our subscription year runs from 1st October to 30th September so all members should have renewed membership for the current year on or after 1st October just passed. There are always a few people who have to be reminded by letter, but as the position stands at the moment a rather alarming number of 44 members have not renewed. The committee is aware that for some unaccountable reason a handful of members did not receive the September mailing, with its newsletter, renewal notice, programme etc but where we have been informed the situation has been rectified, with apologies. Maybe some of the above mentioned 44 are also lacking the said mailing, but of course we do not know unless we are informed. In any case, when you read this if you have not renewed yet, please do so now or as soon as you can. If you do not wish to renew (surely not?) an e-mail, quick phone call or note to me would be very helpful (dot.lincoln @btinternet.com or 0118 942 7563). I'm hoping this little article will save me a lot of work in sending personal reminder letters after Christmas and the club a lot of postage!

Dot Lincoln

Outing News from the RSPB East Berks Group

The next East Berks RSPB coach trip is to Dungeness on 4 February 2007, cost £17.00. As usual, the coach will depart from Braywick Nature Centre at 7.00 am prompt. Bookings may be made with Ernie Allen on 01628 625324.

They are also trying to get a group together for a trip to NE Poland from 1st to 15th of May 2007.

The preliminary itinerary is:

2 nights at Baltic coast, 2 nights at Mazurian Lakes, 3 nights at Biebrza Marshes (hopefully Marek Borkowski will be our guide here), 3 nights at Bialowieza Forest, 2 nights in Bieszczady Mts, 2 nights in Tatry Mts

Cost £1200-£1300 depending on numbers, plus (cheap) flight.

If anyone is interested please contact Sandy Studd on 01494 715609 or e-mail SandyStudd@aol.com as soon as possible.

News from Bosnia

Thank you to all of you who donated binoculars and bird identification books to "Nase Ptice" NGO (Our Birds) in Bosnia.

Smaller binoculars have been given to schools who have shown an interest in the education programmes in natural history at the museum, and also to schools in local environmental action plan areas where my project is working. Each school has received a copy of the book of 50 common birds in local language, and a more extensive bird identification book in English (only the pictures are useful) where we have enough copies.

Larger and heavier binoculars have gone to a new group of young birdwatchers established in the biology faculty. This is an exciting development for the country as it is the first time we have one dedicated birdwatcher willing to take the time to encourage others to develop their skills. Maybe our number of members will start to increase and also the quality of records.

The ministry of the environment has given us money to publish a bird record 2006 for Bosnia. This will be the second successive annual record of bird sightings and the only data available since the war in the 1990s. It looks very small compared with "Birds of Berkshire", but it will grow.

This winter we will develop an electronic reporting tool for monthly bird records. Leicestershire and Rutland are helping to customise their system for Bosnian use. The three computers provided through Reading Urban Wildlife Group and ROC will be earning their keep in data recording (we hope). In the meantime, Dražan is making the bird list for Bosnia and also applying for our second IBA to be considered for RANSAR designation.

Thank you for your help.

Tricia Marcouse



UPCOMING TRIPS

North East and Farne Islands Long Weekend - 7th to 10th June



Several people have registered interest in this trip in which the highlight should be the breeding terns and puffins of the Farne Islands. The idea is that after an early start on 7th we will head North stopping on the way if time permits, at a suitable venue for some worthwhile birding. On the Friday we will either visit the Farne Islands or visit other local sites with interesting possibilities. The Saturday will be the opposite of the Friday! We will also include some local visits for the early morning and evening if there is interest in them. On the way home on Sunday we would expect to offer something as an option part way home.

Where possible, to save money and the environment, we would like to do some car sharing which also makes the stops easier (not to mention the reduction of carbon emissions, see item below. Ed.). On cost we will aim to keep this to a minimum but you can expect something between say £90 and £160 for three nights accommodation and breakfast, lunches provided by yourselves and drinks and dinners at a local pub or restaurant at whatever cost you choose.

Anyone interested should contact Colin on colin.wilson@theroc.org.uk or 01252 837411 as soon as possible so accommodation can be reserved. Latecomers will be accommodated where possible but it may be harder to stay at the same location if we don't book early for what promises to be a great weekend of birding – don't forget to bring your cameras!

TRIP REPORTS

One to remind you how good birdwatching can be in the UK, with another to tempt you further afield.

ROC Trip to Pagham Harbour - Wednesday 3rd May 2006

The day began on Selsey Bill with a sea-watch and migrant passerine hunt. We hunted fruitlessly in the gardens for warblers and chats and eventually worked our way round to 'the wall' where the Selsey regulars sit. There were about 20 of them, all serious sea-watchers, and they told us that while we were scanning the gardens a pomarine skua had pass close inshore behind us, but we has all missed it. However a short while later an arctic skua and a great northern diver passed by, providing reasonable compensation. Also, there was a substantial passage of gannets, kittiwakes, whimbrels and terns to keep us occupied.

At 9-30 we moved to the second meeting point, at Siddlesham, but no further people joined us. We scanned the pool, where the water level was very high, finding a distant sandpiper but little else. A flock of 7 bar tailed godwits (unusual at Pagham in my experience) dropped in for about one minute then moved on, calling as they passed overhead, but the main interest came from two whinchats that sat up perfectly on brambles at the left side of the pool.

We walked down the bund on the west side of the harbour, where the thick hedge between fields and reedbed provides a very rich habitat. There we found numerous common warblers (reed, sedge, whitethroat, willow) and spent several minutes making sure everyone saw a lesser whitethroat; several were singing but they were skulking and elusive, as usual, but we did all have good views eventually. We were starting to get quite hot by this time. Although the day had been fine from the start, it had been quite chilly early on and we were over-dressed. Perspiring slightly, we pressed on to where the bund runs between the saltmarsh and fields, where we found just a single wheatear (but a nice male) and some summer plumage linnets, looking splendid.

On our return to the Nature Centre at Siddlesham we gratefully removed our heavy jackets and, after a quick sandwich, we set off to walk round to the north wall. By this time it was hot, so passerine activity was minimal, and we saw very little until we were half way along the wall, when good numbers of whimbrel flew off the saltmarsh and headed north-east. The biggest flock was 32, but there were at least 60 in total and probably quite a lot more. At the Bognor Regis end of the wall (Breacher's Pool to be exact) we were fortunate to fine a fine male garganey in the edge of a reedbed.

On the way along the 'wall' we had met an excited non-birder who had just been shown his first owl ever, which he maintained was long-eared. This was certainly worth following up (though I was sceptical at first) so we headed for Church Norton, greatly aided by the kind offer of a lift from a friendly birder who was going the same way. We walked back into the harbour from the Church Norton end (almost to the point we had reached in the morning) and after a brief search we found the owl, long-eared as promised, in a bush no more than 30 yards from the path. It was wide awake and in full view so we could see its ear tufts and orange eyes. It preened and shuffled around on its perch, then moved a few feet to an even more open position providing the perfect observing opportunity.



We watched for 15 or 20 minutes then, as it was getting towards 4 o'clock, we set off to return home, but Pagham held one more surprise for us in the form of two spotted flycatchers in trees by the car park.

This turned out to be one of the best excursions I have been on for a while in terms of both the weather and the birds. It is a pity that so few members could come. I can't usually go on mid-week excursions and I only took on this one as a late replacement for the original leader, but I was glad I had done so. We saw 62 species, not a huge number, but several were birds that many birdwatchers don't see very often.

Bill Nicoll

Birdwatching in Extremadura - 4th to 10th May 2006

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

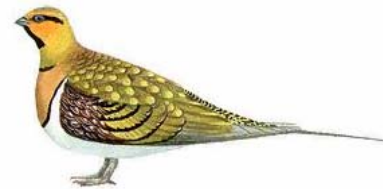
We stayed five nights at the Posada dos Orillas in the beautiful old centre of Trujillo. Not the cheapest of hotels, but excellent rooms, disturbed only by the clacking of White Storks and yells of Lesser Kestrels, both species nesting on the buildings around the Plaza Mayor.

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 Sisticola 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!

Renton Righelato