

Holiday Highlights
Andujar-Lynx
26 – 30 January 2012

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Mary & Dave Braddock, Marilyn Freed, Lin & Steve Gregory, Jean Clarke and Carole Batt

Day 1: Julian meets up with the guests at Malaga Airport after the flight in from Gatwick. We are soon on our way inland towards the Lagunas de Fuentedepiedras, and we stop on the way for some lunch as it is now midday. During lunch we start to build the list with some of the more common local birds whilst sitting outside in the warm sunshine. Around the café are Spotless Starlings and House Sparrows, but the open fields behind with some sparse phragmites produce a large flock of Calandra Larks, female Marsh Harrier, Little Egret and our first Common Kestrel found by Lin.

After the ample bocadillos we continue to Fuentedepiedras seeing Lapwing and Cattle Egret en-route. Once the lake is in sight we start to see hundreds of Greater Flamingos in the shallow waters along with lots of Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. We continue driving around the lagoon to the mirador, seeing our first mammal of the short break – Rabbit, in the extensive Olive groves.

At the mirador we easily find a flock of 500+ Common Cranes in the ploughed fields and spend time watching and listening to their distinctive bugling call. After this we walk out to look over some pools next to the main lagoon and quickly locate our target – Purple Gallinule, with several seen on the edge of the reedbed. Also here are many more species which include Little Grebe (found by Mary), Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Common Coot, a few more Marsh Harriers, Black-winged Stilts, six Avocets and a Green Sandpiper (found by Dave), then Mary chips in again with a Common Snipe. Jean has been watching the closer birds and locates a small flock of Greenfinches and Linnets plus some lovely Black Redstarts. Overhead Julian points out three Ravens and a pair of Common Buzzards adds to the raptor total. There are birds everywhere and in good numbers, making the whole scene tremendous, but we have to leave as Julian wants to call in at the visitor centre.

Mid-afternoon the centre is shut (this is Spain!) so we walk round the back and set up overlooking the main lagoon with a couple of smaller pools also in view. Here we get much closer views of some previously seen species such as the wildfowl, Stonechat, White Wagtail and Chiffchaff. We are also finding new birds such as Moorhen, Sardinian and Dartford Warblers, Robin and a Meadow Pipit. Julian is deliberately scanning the Greater Flamingos and then announces “I think I might

have a Lesser Flamingo, but it's asleep". This is potentially a significant find being a major Spanish rarity but we need to see its bill to clinch the identification. After an agonising wait and needing a Peregrine to disturb the flock it eventually lifts its head and confirms Julian's suspicions, which is tremendous.

Late afternoon we finally set off from this superb reserve and continue towards Andujar. It is generally a quiet journey apart from several White Storks and another Cattle Egret just outside Cordoba with a few roadside Crested Larks and big flocks of Spotless Starlings. However it is Dave who scores en-route with a Black-shouldered Kite sat on a wire just outside Pedro Abades. Sadly he is the only person to see it as we speed along the motorway and time and situation does not really allow us to turn around to try and relocate it. Hopefully it will be there on the return journey!

We reach Andujar with the sun setting in the west and quickly make our way to the hotel. We are quickly allocated our rooms and get settled in, with Julian arranging to meet us later that evening to go through the week's itinerary and our daily checklist. This is then followed by an excellent evening meal, which is a feature of this accommodation in the heart of the Sierra de Andujar.

Day 2: This is our first opportunity searching for the very rare Iberian Lynx and we are all full of hope and optimism – what would the day produce? With breakfast at 7:00am we are ready to leave 45 minutes later, and head out just as it is getting light. As it is our first morning we have to stop for our first Red Deer of which there were several along the route. We see the 'fighting bulls' at Los Escoriales farm and over the hillside several Griffon Vultures are on the wing, which seems quite early for this species to be flying around. Eventually we reach the La Lancha watchpoint which already has a few other observers there looking for Lynxes. We spread out along the track seeing our first (of many) Azure-winged Magpies alongside Eurasian Magpies. An Iberian Green Woodpecker calls from down the valley and a lucky few even manage to see one in flight before disappearing into a Holm Oak. The weather starts to deteriorate a little as it now starts to drizzle but we remain vigilant and Mary is rewarded with first finding a Black Wheatear followed by a Blue Rock Thrush, both good birds for this site.

It is quiet so around midday Julian decides we should have a change of scenery and go for lunch at the picnic tables near the disused village of La Lancha. The light rain has now stopped so we enjoy our 'bocadillos' overlooking the Jandula Dam and the mountains beyond – a wonderful vista. We also look for birds and Jean finds a Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming on a half dead Eucalyptus tree and another couple of Griffon Vultures flying over. However the lack of raptor species is very confusing to Julian who had expected much more than just a few Griffons!

After lunch we proceed down the dirt road to the Jandula Dam wall, where we park and walk across. We quickly find another fine male Blue Rock Thrush on the wall itself with a Black Redstart and several Mallards and a Grey Heron along the river below. As we get to the other side of the dam after discussing the authenticity of the Rock (type) Doves Julian said this was a good place to find Black Wheatear. No sooner had these words had been uttered did Dave say "There's one there!" Sure enough he had found a beautiful male Black Wheatear that shows very well to us all through the telescope. Next we make our way into the cave hoping to find some roosting bats but in winter this can be difficult as most have left to hibernate. However our luck was very much in as we search the cavities and although it is only two bats, we see a Schreiber's Bat and one Greater Mouse-eared Bat – so definitely not a wasted excursion.

We then slowly make our way back to the minibus and since it is now mid-afternoon we make our way back to the watching area. It is again slow going and now fairly difficult to keep our concentration, even Julian was getting tired eyes. However we got our just reward as firstly Julian notices something lying between two bushes but it isn't there when he puts the telescope on it? Although it doesn't take long as he spots the male Iberian Lynx disappearing behind a bush before anyone else from our group can see it. He couldn't believe it, and the next ten minutes are agony but Mary announces "I've got it – by those rabbits". She is spot on because not only is it near the rabbits it is also stalking them and for the next few minutes we are treated to this gorgeous animal trying to catch its dinner. It is unsurprising that this event was the magic moment for most of the group. Sadly it fails in its attempt and wanders off out of sight in disgust but we are elated. The day has been long and tiring but we have got our rewards for all the effort we put in. As the sun is dipping behind the monastery we make our way back to the accommodation. It has been an excellent day.

Day 3: We convene at the usual time and the weather looks much better as dawn breaks over the Sierra de Andujar. We are going back to La Lancha in the hope of getting another sighting of a Lynx today. As we approach Los Escoriales estate there are lots of vultures over the hillside, which include both Griffon and a few Black Vultures – a nice start to the day. As we pass through the fields with the 'fighting bulls' we also see a few Red Deer stag and a buck Fallow Deer. Still we quickly make our way down to the watching area of La Lancha, where we spread out along the usual stretch of track, watching and waiting. Despite the much improved weather it is still very cold with a slight N/E biting wind adding to the chill factor. We get some respite as the sun lifts above the hill tops and starts to warm the earth but it is still cold and difficult to concentrate as the feet and hands numb! However we persevere for a couple of hours with some success as Dave and Mary score with a single Wild Boar moving swiftly down the mountain. Jean enjoys her first good views of a male Sardinian Warbler, Steve and Lin find a few handsome male Fallow Deer amongst the much commoner Red

Deer, Marilyn gets a brief flight view of a Hawfinch, which had been found by Fernando and Julian picks out a couple of Red-billed Chough in the distance.

Being a weekend it starts to get very busy with 'casual watchers' so Julian decides we need to move on and try to find a few of the species of the group's wish list. Lin really wants to get a decent photo of a fighting bull so back at Los Escoriales we stop near the farm. Unfortunately the bulls are a little distant (but come closer in time) but Marilyn utters the immortal words "I've got a Hoopoe". This had been requested by Lin in particular at the start of the short break and she is overjoyed, especially getting a chance to photograph it (along with Mary) as the bird probes for insects. As this was taking place it gives the rest of us time scanning the fields, and there is lots to see. The common birds include Spotless Starlings, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Mistle Thrushes, Collared Doves and Woodpigeons. Although there are also a pair of Stonechats and Black Redstarts on the fence, a group of Corn Buntings 'jangle' from the top of a Holm Oak, Marilyn finds a pair of Lapwing and a pair of Ravens fly across the area. Fernando meets some friends and they point out a few Black Vultures sat with Griffon Vultures and Dave finds a circling Sparrowhawk.

Having spent longer than expected we need to leave for the hotel and soon enough we are ordering a welcome hot drink and using their facilities. Since we have dropped off the mountain and the sun's rays have intensified it is now lovely and we are stripping off layers to compensate. After the break we are going back to the minibus when Mary spots three Common Buzzards above the local Pine plantation. Julian then hears a Firecrest and with a little gentle persuasion coaxes it out into the open to allow the group's paparazzi to get a shot or two. As we are planning to leave Julian picks up a pair of adult Golden Eagles in the distance. They are clearly enjoying the sunshine with some classic display flights and an occasional talon grapple – simply wonderful.

It was now nearly lunchtime so we head off to the Rio Jandula and the river track of Encinarejos, which is still thankfully quite quiet. We stop at one of the many picnic tables and enjoyed our sandwiches, whilst listening to both Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper. After lunch we again search the skies and Dave finds a 'large accipiter' that he thinks is a Goshawk and is absolutely correct – not always an easy identification! We are going to drive a little further down the track and this is hastily done as Julian has seen a large eagle in the distance, which he thinks is a Spanish Imperial Eagle. We stop on the small hill and clamber out, quickly finding three eagles with one just leaving the area and they are all 'Imperials'. For the next few minutes we enjoy fabulous views of these magnificent birds as the pair display and call overhead. Next a Green Sandpiper flies down the river, quickly followed by a Cormorant flying up the river.

At the watch-point we are treated to fabulous views of a female Sardinian Warbler and a Robin as they search for titbits around our feet. We then start

on a walk down to the dam wall, which is incredibly pleasant in the now warm sunshine. We see species like Chaffinch, Black Redstart, Long-tailed, Great and Blue Tits but the highlight is Lin finding a gorgeous Kingfisher just across the river. After giving it due attention we finish our walk on the small iron bridge where we see a couple of White Wagtails, Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Julian shows us some old Lynx scat, which is primarily all fur!

Mid-afternoon we wander back to the minibus, seeing much of the same species, before returning to the Los Pinos for a comfort stop. It is a great raptor day and while Julian waits for the rest of the group he relocates the pair of Golden Eagles this time closer and showing much better. Once these majestic birds had left the area we start back towards La Lancha and at Los Escoriales we stop to photograph a few stag Red Deer. While this is happening Julian hears a very familiar call and said "Spanish Imperial Eagle" So we all get out of the van and quickly find a couple of eagles moving away from the area, but we can still hear their calls. A search of the circling vultures then produces another pair of adult Spanish Imperial Eagles and we watch as they then display overhead – quite incredible. A little shell-shocked by this we continue but only get a little way before Mary expertly spots a Little Owl on the ground amongst the dehesa. We reverse to get a better view but sadly it flies up into a Holm Oak and doesn't show well again, so on we go.

As we reach La Lancha we are greeted by a crowd of people in the track, which can only mean one thing – Lynx. Julian confirms this with one of the attendees so drops us off and goes to park. There is a female Lynx and to some of the group it shows very well, the others getting decent distant views with Steve finding it across the valley ahead of anyone else. However the Iberian Lynx isn't the only interest as Julian spots a couple of Moufflon on the opposite hillside amongst the Holm Oaks. This is then followed by Mary finding another Spanish Imperial Eagle, which could potentially be our eighth of the day – quite incredible. It has been a good and long day and we return to the hotel for a relax and a refresh and then meet later for a fabulous meal, which has become the signature of this excellent accommodation.

Day 4: We want to give ourselves the best chance of seeing Lynx again so after our usual breakfast we head off again to La Lancha. The journey is initially in darkness but we get tremendous views across the valley as it starts to get light. Our spirits are high with anticipation on this excellent morning and when we arrive we all spread out and start to search in earnest. It is Julian again who finds the Lynx, with a fabulous knack of knowing where to look. The down-side is that this male Lynx is transient and very difficult to keep up with. However we persevere trying to get a feel for where it would appear next as it moves through the undergrowth. Both Mary and Dave do very well locating the cat in their telescopes with the rest of us having to settle for an opportunity missed. Thankfully we have all seen this rare mammal previously on this trip! The Lynx

had disappeared down a vegetated gully, so we wait to see if it will reappear, but sadly not. We do see other things of interest which include a small group of Moufflon found by Dave, Fallow and Red Deer, Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, Hawfinch, Red-billed Chough and Jackdaw.

Late morning Julian decides we have had enough and said we will drop down to the deserted village of La Lancha for a comfort stop followed by lunch at Los Escoriales. This is very well received and shortly afterwards we are parking by the picnic site overlooking the Jandula Dam. It is now a lovely warm day and we stay here a while enjoying the scenery and listening to a Great Spotted Woodpecker drum. Once we are ready we head back up the valley to Los Escoriales, where we drive slowly through the dehesa seeing Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Serin, Mistle Thrush, Spotless Starlings and Black Redstarts. Near the farm buildings of Los Escoriales we stop and have our picnic lunch while both Griffon and Black Vulture drift across the valley overhead. Mary finds an excellent Iberian Wall Lizard, which is then followed by a Red Admiral, Small White and Clouded Yellow butterflies. After their lunch Steve and Lin walk further down the road to photograph the 'fighting bulls' in the fabulous conditions. These are then followed by Jean, Carole and Marilyn, who find a lovely male Stonechat, White Wagtails and more finches. During this time Dave, Mary and Julian have been doing a little raptor watching with lots more vultures, a Sparrowhawk and distant Spanish Imperial Eagle.

A little later we all reconvene at the minibus and head back to the CT Los Pinos for a much appreciated coffee. It is a little quiet here compared to the previous day but we do get good views of several Blackcaps, Spotless Starlings and Iberian Magpies, which was certainly worth the effort. It is now mid-afternoon and Julian wants us to give ourselves the best chance of one more Lynx sighting so we drive back up to Los Escoriales. By this time we all know every turn in the road intimately!!! We slowly drive through the dehesa and Mary shouts "Hoopoe on the wire" so we come to an abrupt stop and reverse back into a suitable position. This enables some of us to get a few photographs of the beautiful bird before it flies off over the Holm Oaks. We then carry on to the viewpoints at La Lancha and having spoken to a couple of locals, know we have not missed any Lynx sightings. So we again positioned ourselves looking out across the valley, waiting and hoping.....

Day 5: It is yet another gorgeous day and with an early breakfast and luggage packed away we are heading along the motorway to Cordoba as the sun is rising. The roads are again perfect and we make good time to our coffee stop just north of Antequera. We have been seeing some birds along the route which include several White Storks, Cattle Egrets, a pair of Carrion Crows, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Crested Larks and large flocks of gulls flying inland. Although it is Steve who got the last mammal species of the journey with a Red Fox briefly trotting across an agricultural field. At the rest stop we sit outside and enjoy the weather

(despite the cool breeze) and get sightings of a Hoopoe flying over, several Calandra Larks and a small covey of Red-legged Partridge.

After this short break we continue on to Malaga and as we are heading towards the airport we see a Booted Eagle drifting over the motorway. At San Julian we turn towards the coast and visit the small reserve at the mouth of the Rio Guadalhorce. We park and walk up on to the banking where we initially find a Great Crested Grebe in the river and Dave spies a Zitting Cisticola in the near vegetation. As we set off across the beach we then see a couple of Kentish Plovers and an adult winter Mediterranean Gull flies south over the sea. Eventually we reach the hide overlooking a small lagoon and immediately start to log some new bird species for the day. Marilyn picks out our first, a Black-necked Grebe and Jean finds a White-headed Duck (despite her dislike of them!). Mary then spots a Common Snipe in front of the hide and we also see lots of Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Common Pochard, several Greater Flamingos and Common Coot. Julian then incredibly finds a 'dark-phase' Booted Eagle sat on a dead tree in the lagoon. This bird then flies to the side of the water and has a drink before setting off again and flying round right in front of us – superb. As it climbs higher above the vegetation it is loosely joined by a second 'pale phase' individual, giving us a very good comparison of their coloration. Sadly we haven't got long here as we need to be at the airport so we start back to the minibus in plenty of time. While returning along the beach we find our final new species of the week with a couple of Gannets passing off-shore. We get back to the airport with plenty of time for our flight and say our "goodbyes and thanks" to Julian as he was staying to lead another trip to Andujar soon afterwards.

Species of the Trip

Dave	Male Iberian Lynx & Spanish Imperial Eagle
Mary	Male Iberian Lynx & Spanish Imperial Eagle
Steve	Male Iberian Lynx & Griffon Vulture
Lin	Male Iberian Lynx & Hoopoe
Jean	Male Iberian Lynx & Spanish Imperial Eagle
Carole	Robin & Beetle (sp)
Marilyn	Male Iberian Lynx & Spanish Imperial Eagle

Place of the Trip

Dave	La Lancha viewing area
Mary	La Lancha viewing area
Steve	La Lancha viewing area
Lin	Encinarejos – River Jandula walk
Jean	Los Escoriales (fighting bulls area)
Carole	Los Escoriales (fighting bulls area)
Marilyn	Encinarejos watchpoint

Magic Moment

Dave	Calling Spanish Imperial Eagle at Encinarejos
Mary	1 st sighting of the Lynx
Steve	Hoopoe sat on the wire
Lin	My first Hoopoe at Los Escoriales
Jean	1 st sighting of the Lynx
Carole	1 st sighting of the Lynx
Marilyn	1 st sighting of the Lynx

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Gannet
Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
White Stork
Greater Flamingo
Lesser Flamingo
Common Pochard
Mallard
Eurasian Teal
Shoveler
White-headed Duck
Black shouldered Kite
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Peregrine
Common Kestrel
Moorhen
Coot
Purple Swamphen
Red-legged Partridge
Common Crane
Kentish Plover
Lapwing
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Green Sandpiper
Common Snipe
Black-headed Gull
Mediterranean Gull
Western Yellow-legged Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Rock/Feral Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Little Owl
Common Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Iberian Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker

Calandra Lark
Crested Lark
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
White Wagtail
Robin
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Black Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Zitting Cisticola
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Blackcap
Common Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Tit
Crested Tit (heard only)
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch (heard only)
Short-toed Treecreeper (heard only)
Southern Grey Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Red-billed Chough
Carrion Crow
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Rock Bunting (heard only)
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Iberian (Pardel) Lynx
Rabbit
Red Deer

Fallow Deer
Mouflon
Red Fox
Schreiber's Bat
Whiskered Bat

REPTILES

Iberian Wall Lizard

BUTTERFLIES

Red Admiral
Small White
Clouded Yellow
Swallowtail
Small Copper
Wall Brown