

Andujar - Lynx and Lammergeier

Holiday Highlights

21– 28 January 2024

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Linda Fitch, Judy Dunworth, Dawn & Peter Black, Judy & Steve Down, Sheila Ford

Day 1: Julian, Steve and Judy, Linda, Sheila, Judith, Peter and Dawn land at Malaga Airport a little earlier than scheduled and a very streamlined passage to obtaining the rental vehicle means we now have time to visit Laguna de Fuente de Piedra.

It is a lovely day with some cloud as we head north out of the city through the scenic Montes de Malaga and beyond to the Reserve. We stop near the entrance and get out to look at a small pool where we initially see a couple of White Storks, Shoveler, Teal, Coot and a few Black-winged Stilts. We continue to search, now finding an unexpected Black-tailed Godwit, plus a pair of Stonechat, Black Redstart and Judy finds a Blackcap. In the ploughed fields we see a few Lapwings with both Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls flying over towards the main lagoon. We now go to the parking area and after a welcome picnic we walk slowly round to the mirador where we see lots more gulls and Greater Flamingos. Judy now picks out a group of four Common Cranes in the middle of the shallow saline lagoon, along with our first Shelduck and Moorhen of the week. Sadly, time is against us and we have to leave so it's back to the van and away.

Julian has promised us a comfort stop and after 30 minutes we pull into a motorway service, where we use their facilities and sit outside with some hot drinks. There are several Crested Larks around, along with Spotless Starlings, House Sparrows and Goldfinch. It is now time to head to our hotel in the Sierra de Andujar, which is two hours away still.

We head north to Cordoba seeing Raven, Common Buzzard and Red Kite along the way, with the historic city giving us a view of its most famous landmark – La Mesquita. We now turn east and continue through to Andujar, where we exit the motorway and head up into the Sierra Morena. As we drive up these winding roads to the accommodation Julian and Dawn see our first Iberian Magpies.

We eventually get to the hotel and are greeted by our hostess Laura, who shows us to our rooms with an hour to spare before dinner. Julian is sitting in the reception room with Sheila, Linda and Judith when an Iberian Lynx appears on the 'live feed' tv screen. We now go outside to try and see into this restricted area, but cannot see the animal as this place is fenced off. This is very frustrating as we are joined by Judy, Steve, Peter and Dawn, as we can see it clearly on the screen catching a rabbit before disappearing! It is now dinner time and we enjoy our first wonderful meal in this fabulous location.

Day 2: Breakfast is at 07:00, with Julian arriving 45 minutes later, setting off once we are all ready, for the La Lancha valley.

We drop down to the main road and then after a little way turn off again on to another minor road, which is winding and slow due to tree roots growing up through the tarmac! It is a cold morning as we climb, but still get a wonderful view of the sunrise over the Sierra Nevada mountains as we pass by the viewpoint. Eventually we reach Los Escoriales, with it's 'fighting bulls' and here we now stop for our first Red Deer, followed quickly by a small herd of buck Fallow Deer – nice start.

We now drop down this metalled road to the valley, boasting a series of watchpoints, to aide looking for Iberian Lynx. Julian's heart drops a little as the valley bottom is shrouded in fog, which will clearly hamper our chances of this rare feline. We stop at one of the covered watchpoints and set up looking out over the valley, checking the areas we can and hoping the mist will lift soon. The sun is starting to show in the valley, which is making things a little more active as we get views of our first Red-legged Partridge, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Sardinian Warbler and Chaffinch of the day. We keep searching but the mist is still being a problem, although we do get great views of a very close Dartford Warbler and a Little Owl sat on a rock. Linda and Judith are busy also finding a few plants with Common Jonquil, *Astrogallus luscitanicus*, Storksbill and others being in flower.

Around 10:30 with the mist getting worse not better, Julian decides on a plan B and we are back in the vehicle and driving up to Escoriales. As we get to the open fields Pete says "Hoopoe" and we immediately stop the van, with the bird just metres away in the shade of a Holm Oak. We get tremendous views as it feeds on the ground, probing for insects and occasionally raising its distinctive crest. After a while it flies off and we now turn our attention to the Siskins, which are also feeding nearby, apparently a species not often seen here.

We set off again slowly along the track, looking at the ancient 'comederos de granados' (granite feeding bowls) and also a lovely flock of colourful Iberian Magpies. We reach the end of the track and pull into the side, now getting out for a walk back the way we have come. It is warm and sunny as we soon stop to look at another couple of Little Owls on granite boulders, plus Corn Buntings, Stonechat and Meadow Pipit. We continue to walk through this lovely dehesa of Holm and Cork Oak, seeing more Red-legged Partridge and our first Woodlarks of the tour. As we reach the entrance to one of the private estates, Julian and Sheila spot a large falcon flying low over the scattered trees and our guide shouts "Peregrine". Unfortunately, it has disappeared before anyone else could see it, which is a shame as they are not easy to see here! It is now nearly lunchtime and our guide suggests he goes back for the minibus and we continue to walk slowly along the track. It is about 30 minutes later when Julian reappears and Judy informs him we have not seen anything unusual, with the highlight being a couple of large Red Deer stags.

We now all get into the minibus and drive slowly back down to the La Lancha and beyond to the derelict village of the same name, stopping at the mirador overlooking the Embalse de Jandula. We grab our picnic lunches and walk to the granite tables where we sit in the sun, listening to Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper, enjoying our bocadillos. As it's now so warm there are a few butterflies on the wing, with our first Western Dappled White, Small Copper and Clouded Yellow. There are Griffon Vultures circling over the distant ridges and Julian points out a couple of Black Vultures (from their jizz!), but also promising to show us some closer ones – fingers crossed. As we continue to search the skies, Julian now picks out a Spanish Imperial Eagle within a closer 'kettle' of Griffon Vultures and we can see this bird is different and watch as a tiny Kestrel mobs this much larger eagle – surely not a good idea?

Once we have finished and used the 'al fresco' facilities we set off further down the hill, stopping for a group of Spanish Ibex, which consist mainly of females, young males and a couple of kids. We enjoy a few minutes watching and photographing these 'mountain goats' before heading to the Jandula Dam wall where we park.

Julian now grabs his torch and takes us across the dam wall, which is covered in Crag Martins swirling around, along with a couple of House Martins. Judy is checking the pools below and finds our first Moorhen along with a couple of Mallard. We eventually reach the tunnel and our guide proceeds to check the tiny blast-holes above our head, but with very little success. We are very nearly at the other side, when he says, "got one" and shines his torch to the back of the hole, which reveals a tiny Schreiber's Bat. We take turns to look at it and see that this shape is a bat! This is the only one we find which is unusual and probably a consequence of the recent storms.

We now head back out into the sunlight and recross the dam wall walking out along the steep-sided valley, where we disturb more Spanish Ibex. Overhead Julian hears a distinctive call and points up saying "Spanish Imperial Eagle", in fact there are three – a pair of adults and a sub-adult, which must have strayed into their territory. We watch as they separate and disappear over the ridge before wandering on with Judy now finding another small flock of Siskins, along with a few Black Redstart. It is now late afternoon and Julian is keen to get back to La Lancha and spend the rest of the day looking for lynx.

This afternoon Julian decides we will watch from another viewpoint as not to have the sun directly in our faces, as we park and spread out a little. Most of us are with Julian on the viewing platform with Judith, Pete and Dawn a little further away on the track. It is still quiet generally although the sight of seven Black Vultures circling above us is fantastic and one of the best counts here our guide has ever known, especially strange as there are no Griffons with them. It remains quiet until around 17:30 when Judith gets really excited by a brief view of a Lynx, literally just below where shew was sitting. No one else has seen it and it's disappeared into the thick vegetation close by. This is both wonderful and awful

for her as it was such a quick view and she is the only person to see one so far – Julian understands this scenario all too well from previous visits. We now become more vigilant with us keeping a careful watch on places it could potentially reappear. We stay here until the sun has dropped behind the monastery and the light starts to fade but without any further sightings of this rare mammal – so we head back to the accommodation for a very welcome freshen up, conduct the checklist and have a fabulous evening meal, after an eventful first full day.

Day 3: This morning, we leave Gato Clavo at 08:00 and again drive up towards Los Escoriales, stopping for a Little Owl sat on an overhead wire, spotted by Steve. At this private estate we stop to get a good look at the ‘fighting bulls’ which are being a little frisky on this cool morning.

We soon now continue down to the La Lancha valley, which this morning is mist free thankfully and we park near to the watchpoint we utilised the previous afternoon. We set up our scopes and almost immediately Julian finds an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle sat in a small Holm Oak. This is then quickly followed by Judy spotting a large male Spanish Ibex on the opposite hillside, looking resplendent, through the scope in the early morning sunshine. There are actually a few there dotted around the granite boulders and we watch them moving slowly down the hill and out of sight.

It is another lovely, unseasonably warm morning as the sun covers the whole valley, as we get great views of the commoner bird species, especially the photogenic Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, close to the platform. There is a commotion below us with the Eurasian Magpies and Julian is on alert for a Lynx when a huge European Eagle Owl flies out and low across the valley. Only our guide and Sheila get to see this bird, which is very unusual in this place and especially mid-morning. We continue to be vigilant, as Black and Griffon Vultures appear over the adjacent ridge and a few Fallow Deer are seen in the valley bottom. Pete and Dawn spot our first Painted Lady, along with lots of Western Dappled Whites and Clouded Yellows but sadly no cats! It is noon and Julian decides we need a change of scenery.

Back in the bus we set off back out of the La Lancha valley to Los Escoriales, stopping for Serins, Chaffinches and Red-legged Partridge along the way. At the T junction we make a slight detour, taking another minor road, where Julian has seen lynx in previous years. It’s another fabulous area as we see more of the commoner birds and a few Red Deer – stopping at a wonderful layby looking south towards the Sierra de Cazorla and the snow-clad mountains of the Sierra Nevada. It is now nearing lunchtime and Julian is keen to drive back to his accommodation so we can get a feel for where we should have been staying. It’s an easy journey and 30 minutes later we are parking up at La Caracola. Laura and Ramon are here also to welcome us and take our orders for some hot refreshments, which is most welcome. Julian grabs the lunch bag, and we now sit outside in the warm sunshine, enjoying our food, drink and especially the ambiance of these lovely grounds. As we are sitting there, vultures drift overhead,

with both Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper in the nearby pine trees. Once we have finished Julian now has another wee surprise as he splits us into two groups of three to visit the small photo hide overlooking a bird feeding station. We are allocated half an hour each, and we only get views of birds we would likely encounter in the UK but it's a lovely experience.

We set off around 15:00 and drive down to the Rio Jandula where we turn off the main road and park just beyond the entrance to the track. Julian informs us we are going to now have a slow walk along the side of the river, which sounds lovely. We haven't gone far when Julian sees an interesting bird and through the scope confirms it's a male Cirl Bunting. It is sat on a low branch with another on the ground below but unfortunately, they don't stay there too long, not allowing everyone to see them. Judy is scanning the rocks in the river and finds a Grey Wagtail along with a Spanish Terrapin, basking in the sunshine (and who can blame it!).

We continue to stroll along the track spotting lots of butterflies including Small Heath, Brimstone and a Long-tailed Blue, which is a surprise so early in the year. Julian now sees one of his 'hoped-for' species – a Hoopoe, putting the telescope on it for us all to see, which is brilliant and a real favourite of Judith and Linda. This bird is joined by a second and they both fly off across the river and we keep walking along. Overhead we can hear a Spanish Imperial Eagle calling and quickly find it high up, along with another bird. This is also a Spanish Imperial Eagle, but 1st/2nd year and looking very different to the adult. It is great to get this comparison as the adult ushers this immature away from their territory, as this pair will be settling down to breed.

Julian now takes us further and to a place where Lynx-watching was done and we sit for a while looking out over the dehesa and mountains in the distance. While we are here, we are watching some vultures and a young Golden Eagle appears in the distance and we clearly see its distinctive white wing patches and white base to the tail, even at this distance – brilliant! Time is now moving on and Julian is keen to get in place for our evening Otter-watch, so we again set off to an area where he had promised to show Linda and Judith Hoop Petticoat Narcissus. Our guide points out these delightful wee daffodils and also informs us he is going to walk back for the minibus and will meet us all back here or a little further down the track at some picnic tables.

Julian sets off back and has to stop as he has now found another new butterfly, which is also new to the tour – Provencal Hairstreak. He eventually gets back to the van and drives slowly along the metalled track to where we are and together we continue a little further along the river. We are now at an area where we can walk out on to the granite rocks which stick out into the river and here, we settle down quietly to watch. The river levels are higher than Julian is used to (another by-product of the recent storms) but it's a lovely still evening as we see Cormorants, Moorhen and Long-tailed Tits close by. Sheila does fantastically to find a Kingfisher sat on a branch at the far side of the pool and a Cetti's calls from

the adjacent bushes but we cannot see it (surprise, surprise). The light is just starting to fade, when an Otter is spotted in the far corner of the pool but coming towards us and frantic, whispered directions are given. It continues to dive and surface coming our way and predicting its next visible point is not easy, even when it's literally just metres away. However, we persevere and most of us get a decent view before it disappears down the river.

It is now time to leave and as we make safe passage back to the minibus a few Common Pipistrelles are seen hawking insects over the river – a great end to another fabulous day.

Day 4: We have breakfast and after getting ready we set off as it's starting to get light, on another beautiful morning. We drive down through the olive groves to the motorway again, seeing a frost laying on the ground. Once on the motorway we quickly make our way east towards Ubeda, where we make a stop for fuel and use the facilities. We now join the minor road to Cazorla, travelling through more olive plantations; in fact they can be seen for miles in every direction! Although in the distance, the snow-capped mountains of the Sierra Nevada make for a lovely backdrop to the south.

Our progress is slowed by farm vehicles on the road, but soon enough we reach the mountain enclave of Cazorla. We now drive up and through this small town continuing up through other villages until we reach the entrance to the Sierra de Cazorla Natural Park.

Our first stop is soon after entering the Reserve at the interestingly named Puerto de Palomas (Pigeon Port), where we get out and marvel at the incredible scenery. The views around this gorgeous valley are fabulous and our cameras try to reflect this, but it's difficult. We check around the mirador with Judith, spotting a couple of Red Deer and a Red-legged Partridge, followed by Judy finding a lovely male Blue Rock Thrush. As we are watching these plus a couple of Carrion Crows, Julian now sees a Black Wheatear, another new bird for the list. We keep searching and Sheila locates a couple of Linnets, followed by a female Blue Rock Thrush before it's time to move on.

We head along this winding road, turning off towards the 'source of the Rio Guadalquivir' as we now start to climb. The road is quiet as we traverse up the mountain, with Julian pointing out some Green Hellibore at the side of the road. The tarmac road finishes and we continue up on this metalled road, which is a little bit bumpier – something we are now quite used to! Steve now says, "there's something dark with a long tail" and Julian immediately stops. We scan the area Steve has seen this mammal and find it at the base of a pine – Red Squirrel (which are almost black here!). We all manage to get a view before this animal runs up the trunk and into the canopy out of sight. Julian does see a second individual, but that also quickly disappears up into the dense foliage of these trees. We again continue our drive up, eventually getting to the hamlet of Nava de San Pedro.

We park and get out of the van on this glorious day with more clear blue skies, now looking for another major target – Lammergeier. We do see our first Griffon Vulture of the day sat on a rock just above us, a Raven and a couple of Red Kites, plus in the adjacent fields there are several Black Redstarts. Our guide has promised us a hot drink and we now start to walk the short distance down to the quirky bar. We stop on the way as there are Coal Tits and a Crested Tit, plus Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreepers around, but it isn't long before we get there.

We first make full use of the facilities while Julian makes the order and we head back outside to continue searching the ridgelines for vultures. We now see a group of Siskin in the bushes and while watching these Julian hears a Firecrest singing. He does a little 'pishing' and there just above our heads is this gorgeous male Firecrest with its 'flame-like' head feathers erect – just superb. The drinks arrive and we enjoy them in the sunshine, constantly checking the Griffon Vultures in the distance. We finish the drinks and start back towards the bus, but we are stopped as Julian has found a couple of Common Crossbills at the top of a nearby Pine. Sadly, these don't stay long enough and only a few of us get to see them, but Judy has now found our first Dunnock of the trip. We soon get back to the minibus and keep hoping for Lammergeier, but have to make do with a Great Spotted Woodpecker before continuing our journey higher.

The drive is slow along the gravel track as we keep an eye out for wildlife, seeing a couple of Jays fly across our path. This is now eclipsed as Julian comes to an immediate stop and points to the left saying "Mouflon" with two rams standing, staring at us from just 50m away. This is superb as we all get very good looks at these wild sheep, which we have surprisingly struggled with on the Sierra de Andujar. The photographers are enjoying this as they are posing very nicely before walking slowly deeper into the Pine forest. We also move on as it is getting to lunchtime and our guide has a specific place he wants to be.

It is not long before we are turning off the metalled road and facing another wonderful vista, a huge limestone massif – Monte Navahonda. This is where the Lammergeier's first freely bred after the reintroduction and who can blame them, it's stunning. We grab our lunches and find a suitable seat on one of the low boulders, listening to the sound of Coal and Crested Tits in the surrounding conifers. The words 'pinch me, I think I'm dreaming' comes to mind! We stay here eating our lunches, watching the vultures patrol the limestone ridge and hoping for a Bearded Vulture. Julian is thinking of moving on when he spots the distinctive shape of a Lammergeier in the distance. A few of us manage to get a decent view through the telescope, but some sadly don't before it disappears out of sight! We decide to stay a little longer in the hope of it returning, which sadly it doesn't, but we do get a good view of a Crested Tit in the nearby trees.

It's difficult to drag ourselves away from here but needs must and we set off back down the mountain, stopping again for another look at the Mouflon. We are constantly checking the ridges on either side of the vehicle and occasionally

stopping for any groups of vultures, which also produces a flock of Red-billed Chough. As we near the place Steve had found the Red Squirrel, we joke about how we could use his 'squirrel-superpower' to do it again – and he does! Spotting another animal on the trunk of a conifer, that again disappears up into the canopy after a minute or so. We continue our traverse back towards Nava de San Pedro and another group of Griffons are seen, but Julian decides to get out of the minibus to check them and shouts "Lammergeier". This adult is much closer than the previous one and as we pile out of the van we manage to get a good view before it dips out of sight behind the ridge. We continue scanning the area and a fabulous adult Golden Eagle appears and soars right across the valley – what a result. We stay a little longer in the warm afternoon sunshine, but time is moving on. Pete and Dawn find a cracking Iberian Wall Lizard with Linda, Sheila and Judith enjoying some botanising.

We leave here and set off back down the mountain, rejoining the main road and eventually exiting the Natural Park, where we see a small group of big male Spanish Ibex at the side of the winding road. We now continue back down through Cazorla and out on the road back to Ubeda, stopping for refreshments at a roadside café. We sit outside in the sunshine looking out over Cazorla, dominated by its Moorish castle and watchtowers, surrounded by the mountain of the Sierra de Cazorla – what a magnificent outlook. Once we have finished and made full use of the facilities, we set off back to Andujar with another beautiful sunset in the west.

Day 5: Another glorious morning as we set off again for La Lancha in the hope of finding an Iberian Lynx, but these unseasonably warm, clear, moonlit nights are making things difficult. We encounter the usual Red Deer and birds along the way, this morning, parking at the bottom of the valley. We get our things and spread out with some of us walking up to the next viewing platform seeing a couple of handsome buck Fallow Deer in the valley bottom, along with several more Red Deer. We are scattered around the platform searching in different areas with Julian again finding an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle sat in a small Holm Oak. Pete and Dawn have been for a wander down the track and report they have seen a small group of mature male Spanish Ibex on the adjacent hillside, which is brilliant.

As it starts to warm up the birds become a little more vocal and active with good views of Serin, Greenfinch, Dartford and Sardinian Warblers. Linda finds a Little Owl sat on a nearby rock, which is then followed by Sheila finding another sat in a rock hole, which is so sweet through the telescope. Judith has been doing a bit more botanising and finds an unusual (and lovely) plant – Brown Bluebell, yet another example of how early things seem to be this year. Julian has a slow walk back to the minibus with a couple of us and we see a second adult Spanish Imperial Eagle soaring over the valley with a kettle of vultures and on our return, we also find a couple of very obliging male Rock Buntings. We inform the others, who also get some good views of these gorgeous 'humbug-head' buntings, as things start to quieten down around midday.

Our guide decides we need a change of scenery and we walk back to the minibus and continue further down towards La Lancha village. A couple of birds at the side of the road make us stop as we now get fabulous. Close looks at two Woodlarks, feeding on the grassy verge. Once everyone's ready we continue down to the mirador overlooking the Embalse de Jandula.

We enjoy our 'bocadillos' in the sunshine again with Black and Griffon Vultures overhead. Judy and Steve are remaining vigilant and find some sat on the far hillside, which proceed to run up the slope and try to take off. This is both comical and fascinating to watch as these ungainly raptors attempt to get airborne.

Once we have all finished we pack up and drive further down the hill towards the dam wall, stopping for a group of Spanish Ibex close to the track. At the bottom we again park by the dam and ready ourselves for another venture into the bat tunnel. The walk over the dam wall produces the usual Crag Martins, a pair of Mallards and a couple of Red-billed Chough, with Linda seeing a big flock of House Martins high overhead. At the tunnel, Julian starts checking the holes and again they are unoccupied, which is a shame after the recent good weather. He does find the Schrieber's Bat in the same hole then, in one of the last holes a Greater Mouse-eared Bat. This larger pale bat is laid down in its hole, giving the distinct impression of a Greggs sausage roll! It is another great addition to the mammal list. Pleased with this success we return to the minibus and set off back towards La Lancha.

As we get to the start of the valley, Julian stops to look at a shape on a rock, high up on the slope and it's an Iberian Grey Shrike. We park and get out of the bus to get a good view of this lovely predator, as it sits there totally unconcerned by our presence. Soon enough it does leave as do we, driving up past several vigilant Lynx-watchers who have not seen anything. It's the heat of the day and Julian decides it's prudent to combine facilities stop with refreshments and takes us to a bar/restaurant, where we can do both.

Once we have finished, we now set off down to the river again at Encinarejos. We park and walk along the track stopping to watch a large flock of Iberian Magpies feeding around some nearby picnic tables. It's fabulous to watch these beautifully gawdy, gregarious, members of the crow family, follow each other round making their very distinctive calls. Judy and Steve venture down to the river's edge where they flush a Green Sandpiper from one of the exposed rocks, with Pete and Dawn photographing a large Spanish Terrapin. We reach the watchpoint having added Wal Brown to the butterfly list and a couple of basking Iberian Wall Lizards. Here Steve and Judy do well by finding another new bird – Great White Egret, which allows us to get some excellent views sat in the top of a nearby tree.

We walk on a little further, where we see a pair of Hoopoes as Julian again heads back for the minibus, stopping for a Spanish Imperial Eagle on the way. He soon enough returns with the van and we all now drive down to the Encinarejos dam

wall. We walk out on to the bridge and watch below in the hope of seeing another European Otter. As we are waiting, we get good views of a Kingfisher sat on a rock, Grey Wagtail, Blue Rock Thrush and we even manage to see a Cetti's Warbler fly between two bushes. We are joined by more people looking for Otter and again as the sun is setting, we find one out in the open water. This animal is also difficult to track, but we persevere and watch it make its way towards us. Sadly, there is just too much disturbance, and the Otter decides to retreat the way it had come and disappears out of sight. It is now time to leave as the Common Pipistrelle's are whirling round the bridge at eye level – brilliant!

Day 6: Today is a slightly more relaxed start today as we are having a 'day-off' from looking for Iberian Lynx, heading into Castilla La Mancha for predominantly steppe species. We leave around 07:45 and after slowly dropping down to La Quintera, we take the motorway towards Madrid. We head east initially, then north before reaching the border of these two regions at the impressive Parque Natural de Despenaperros.

Across the border the topography of the terrain changes as we start to drive though large flat areas of agricultural land. It is a cold morning with -3C on the van's digital readout, which is evident outside with a frost on the ground. After a while, driving north we turn off the motorway on to a country road, which is very quiet after passing the crocodile roundabout! On we go seeing at the side of the road a pair of White Storks nesting on huge crane, which we assume is out of commission. We are now in the Campo de Calatrava, with extensive fields of wheat, barley, vine and some olive but there's a low-lying mist that is hampering visibility. We need a comfort stop and pull into the only petrol station around and we can use the adjacent café's facilities, which is brilliant and shortly after we are leaving here and heading towards Ciudad Real.

This is now bustard/sandgrouse country and our guide is keeping a careful periphery eye out for anything in the open fields. He spots a group of shapes and pulls over to the side, finding 10+ Little Bustards stood and sat together, which is brilliant as this is one of the more difficult species to see here. We all manage to get a good view from the vehicle and soon enough we have to leave as we have crossed a solid white line at the side of the road. We continue the drive north, seeing more White Storks flying over the road and shortly after we turn on to a farm track.

It is still a bit muddy after the recent inclement weather but passable, however it's the mist that is causing us an issue at the moment. We do have some visibility and a search of the adjacent fields reveals our first Calandra Larks of the tour, along with lots of Corn Buntings. A female Marsh Harrier drifts over the field and a group of birds fly up making their very recognisable call – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. We now get a wonderful view of these shy steppe birds as they wheel round in front of us, constantly calling before heading off into the fog. Judy is now searching the ground and at the back of the field finds another small group, but they are very difficult to see. Julian suggests we have a walk to see if we can get closer and

off, we go. We are struggling to refind them on this undulating ground and the mist has got a little worse, so we return to the bus and continue a slow drive.

As we snail along we see Stonechats, Meadow Pipits, Linnets and lots of Magpies, before in the distance Julian sees some familiar shapes – Great Bustards. The sun is now burning off the mist and our visibility is much better, as we try to get closer to these fabulous birds. We park and get out of the bus but that causes them to fly, but they go right past us like a squadron of B52 bombers.

We again drive on with this same scenario happening a few more times and our bustard count must be getting to three figures, which is superb. At one place Julian sees another large flock in the distance and this time we have another chance of putting the telescope on them without any disturbance. We stop on the brow of a rise and get out, but we are blocking the track, so Julian has to go and turn round while we look at the Great Bustards. As he drives slowly on, he sees another flight of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, plus a couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. There are also Little Bustards here too feeding in the field and our guide hopes the rest of us have seen all this while stood outside. He manages a turning point and returns to us and the good news we also have seen these birds with a total of four Black-bellied Sandgrouse being seen.

Once we have 'filled our boots' with these fantastic steppe birds we move on, as it is also nearing lunchtime. We continue to drive slowly, stopping for a healthy flock of Spanish Sparrows before reaching a suitable place for the picnic. It is now very warm, with clear blue skies as we again alight the bus with the sight of majestic Great Bustards in the distance. A Sparrowhawk flies over, with a couple of Red Kites and another Marsh Harrier floats across these extensive agricultural fields, adding to the ambience of this incredible place.

After lunch, we need to leave and eventually find our way back to the main road where we track back south, seeing a lovely male Marsh Harrier, Hoopoe, Iberian Shrike and a Kestrel. Although the rigours of early mornings and the warm sunshine have taken its toll and most of us miss these as we drive along. We soon turn off the main road and head out to the impressive hill-top enclave of the Castillo de Calatrava. We park at the base of the hill for a photo opportunity, before driving the meandering track up to the parking area with fabulous vistas all over Calatrava.

The castle is closed but Julian allows us some time to look round before reconvening for a walk back down the hill. There are Griffon Vultures floating around and in the scattered olive trees are Chaffinches, Blackcaps and a Wren. Once back together we set off slowly down the track, but it's quiet in the warm afternoon sunshine. A small stand of flowers catches our eye, which are identified as White Hoop Petticoat Narcissus and another one Julian's never seen previously. Our guide now hears a familiar call and finds one of the target species – Thekla's Lark, which is very similar to its cousin the Crested Lark but more montane in its habitat. We keep walking down and at an appropriate place Julian

says "adieu" and sets off back up for the bus. We now slowly keep walking seeing a couple of Red-legged Partridge along the way, meeting Julian almost at the bottom. It is now late afternoon and with a long drive back we set off back towards the Andalucian border.

A comfort stop has been requested and just over the border we pull into a motorway services, where we also have a very welcome refreshment. We soon set off but get pulled over by the traffic police as allegedly our driver did not stop at a 'stop sign' coming away from the service station. Julian doesn't argue and grudgingly pays the officer before heading off towards Andujar.

We exit the motorway and get to the accommodation around 18:15, with us all heading to our rooms for a freshen up. Julian (who's in another hotel) waits in the lounge doing some notes but then notices on the 'live feed' screen an Iberian Lynx sitting there. His strategy is simple as he runs down to overlook the small pool, where he sees the animal, then sprints to the single rooms that are annexed to the main building. Here he gets the attention of Sheila, Judith and Linda, giving them the news, before sprinting round to the main building, where he now bursts in on the other two couples. It is manic now as Julian has a small opening through bushes on a dwarf wall to point out the Lynx still sat there. We are getting through everyone and their first look, when the cat decides to move on with Steve, Pete and Dawn still not having seen it! We wait a while before heading back to our respective rooms and seats, with the Iberian Lynx not reappearing on the screen. It is another 'bittersweet' situation as we hope our 'private estate' tour tomorrow will provide views for everyone.

Day 7: It is our final full day and our tour with a local company to a private estate on yet another lovely sunny day. Paco arrives a little after 07:30 in a large 9-seater vehicle, which is excellent having plenty of room for both us and our kit. It is still dark as we set off from Gato Clavo, but the first rays of light are starting to appear. We drive out on the road to Los Escoriales but instead of turning off for La Lancha we take the track down towards the village of Baños de Encina.

Our first stop is at a fantastic mirador that overlooks the Sierra de Cazorla and beyond to the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains. We have already seen Corn Buntings, Stonechat, Iberian Magpies and a couple of roadside Red Deer. At the watchpoint we scan the valley below for Iberian Lynx, but only find a few more Red Deer. We are back in the van and keep driving slowly down the hill, stopping to look at a lovely Little Owl, Mistle Thrush, Stonechat and other commoner species.

Eventually we reach Baños de la Encina and stop to admire the Moorish castle that dominates the village and it made mostly of mud. As we are there we can see several Jackdaws flying round the ramparts, plus a few Blackcaps in the nearby bushes. It is now time for our second breakfast as we head off from the village with a few White Storks flying across the road in front of us.

Paco now drives us through some lovely countryside and on a secret track to the entrance to an old derelict lead mine where we stop for a mid-sized raptor sat in one of the roadside trees. The sun is behind it making it difficult to initially discern, but once we move position we can clearly see it's a Booted Eagle. This is a great surprise to both Pablo and Julian who have never seen one inland here at this time of year before, but we are all thrilled with this fabulous sighting and the views we are getting.

Once everyone is satisfied, we move off and soon after find a suitable parking place with views over the derelict mine shaft, which is now surrounded by beautiful countryside. As our Spanish guide prepares the 'al fresco' breakfast he tells us of the lead mining industry here, which is really fascinating. He also has sorted a very special breakfast having erected a picnic table with tablecloth and food typical of this region, which is just superb. We stay here for a while enjoying the break and the sunshine and seeing the expected Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Black Redstart and Robins. It is now late morning as we pack up the provisions and equipment, now setting off for the private estate.

Paco decides we shall take the longer but more scenic route to our destination which proves a fantastic decision as we see an Osprey migrating north, which again is very early! Eventually we reach the Embalse de la Fernandina, which takes us through a quaint village and the turn off for the private estate. It is really noticeable now how many more Rabbits there are around here, compared to the Sierra de Andujar – clearly a good place for Iberian Lynx.

It is a little after noon when we arrive at the gates of the private estate we will be exclusively visiting for the rest of the day. As we drive through this beautiful estate surrounded by classic dehesa of Holm and Cork Oaks we flush an Iberian Green Woodpecker from the side of a tree, landing a little further away but in full view, which is great. As we continue, this is then followed by a pair of Little Owls being pointed out by Paco. Eventually we reach the place we are going to watch from, with the Rio Despenaperros below us. We set up the telescopes and settle down in the heat of the afternoon with the shade of the trees, giving us a little protection.

Paco now explains the situation with potentially what could be seen and the Lynx they have recently encountered, which is very positive. As we are scanning Julian spots a group of ducks in the water with the expected Mallard, Teal and Shoveler, but also a couple of Gadwall, which is new for the trip. Paco trains his telescope on a large tree in the river valley bottom, where there are a pair of adult Spanish Imperial Eagles and the views are tremendous. He explains that they are a breeding pair and currently getting their eyrie ready for another brood. Overhead we constantly see both Griffon and Black Vultures along with the occasional Raven, a large flock of Jackdaw and a few Red-billed Chough. We keep searching but it is a little quiet for mammals, although there are lots of Rabbits, which can only be a good thing? The pair of eagles now take to the air and start to circle up right in front of us, which is fantastic and then the male (clearly smaller

bird) goes into his display of climbing and diving back down – what a treat. This adult then heads off away from the nesting area and in the distance amongst another kettle of vultures is another pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles and their territories overlap. They must have come too close to this pair's nest and this adult male is seeing them off, both vocally and actively – fascinating stuff. Julian now sees an immature Spanish Imperial Eagle amongst the vultures and this bird also gets the attention of the male in what is like some avian soap opera! This all calms down a little with the original pair disappear as the other adult eagles have moved away from their territory and the immature bird has gone completely. It is the raptors that are holding our attention at the moment as a couple of Red Kites slowly drift across the viewshed, then Julian picks up another young Spanish Imperial Eagle and there's an accipiter too. These birds are uber distant and unfortunately, it's only him and Judy who can see them through their telescopes. The two birds start to separate and they both stay on the hawk as Julian is certain it's a Gos. They keep carefully watching, taking the salient details and confirming the initial I.D. before it disappears. It is now late afternoon and Paco offers us a 'plan B' for a final chance of getting a good Lynx sighting for everyone.

We are soon back in the minibus and driving down the track towards the river, having to stop and walk because it becomes impassable from mud. We only have a few hundred metres to go, when we stop and set up the telescopes at the rivers edge, but with good views in either direction. We try to cover all areas and in doing so find a Little Grebe fishing in the water and a Green Sandpiper flies past. Julian hears the distinctive call of a Spanish Imperial Eagle and looks up to find the local male now chasing off another immature bird, which is different to the previous two and potentially makes our seventh Spanish Imperial eagle today – about 1% of the world population!. Paco knows of a European Eagle Owl nest site and checks the hole in the rock face and finds one sitting there. It is a long way off and not easy to see even through the telescope but we are persevering with all the members of our group, until Paco now utters those immortal words "Lynx".

It isn't quite panic stations but near enough as Paco is trying to explain where it is, as one by one we are starting to see it move along the river's edge towards us. Pete and Dawn are still struggling when this Iberian Lynx decides to disappear behind a large Hawthorn. We wait for a while to see if anything moves and Julian is desperately trying to relocate it with his thermal imaging scope. Our guide decides to go and try to get a better vantage point to try and see behind the Hawthorn and moves off through the undergrowth. This has obviously done the trick as after another 10 minutes the cat reappears and it's still coming towards us, with Pete and Dawn now managing to get a sighting – superb. Paco is telling us it's a three year-old female wearing a location collar, which was put on as a youngster raised on this private estate from natural parentage. It is almost opposite where we are standing when Julian comes back and he is elated with the news we have all seen this gorgeous cat. We continue to watch her walk slow past and finally lay down partially hidden from view on this warm afternoon. We wait now watching the Lynx laying there, contentedly breathing and occasionally twitching her short

tail. A little after 5pm she decides to move on, but we don't get to see her again as she disappears into the dense vegetation. It is smiles and relief all round, especially for our guides, who have worked tirelessly during today and this week.

It is now time to leave for Gato Clavo, but first we get one last look at the European Eagle Owl, who looks superb now in the late afternoon sunshine and not like a rock at all! We soon get back to the van and set off, getting to the hotel around 18:30. Julian waits while we all freshen up and we conduct the checklist before the evening meal, bringing a close to this very memorable week.

Day 8: We have to be at Malaga Airport before midday, so we are packed and ready to leave by 08:30, giving a fond farewell to our wonderful hostess Laura, who's worked tirelessly. We drive slowly along the track to the minor road and then down to Andujar, turning off to the motorway. The journey to Córdoba is easy, with very little traffic on the road being a Sunday and as we reach and pass the city, we see White Storks stood on their nests and a few silhouetted Red Kites passing overhead. We now turn south seeing Common Buzzards and a Raven at the side of the motorway before stopping for fuel and a comfort break near Antequera. Our journey continues towards the airport getting there in good time for our flight home.

Species of the Trip

Sheila – Iberian Lynx/Firecrest/Spanish Imperial Eagle/Iberian Magpie
Judith – Iberian Lynx/Firecrest/Brown Bluebell/White Hoop Petticoat Narcissus
Dawn – Iberian Lynx/Spanish Ibex/Great Bustard
Pete – Iberian Lynx/Firecrest/Booted Eagle
Steve – Iberian Lynx/All the bustards (because of their name!)
Judy – Iberian Lynx/Spanish Imperial Eagle/Grieffon Vulture
Linda – Iberian Lynx/Mouflon/Great Bustard
Julian – Iberian Lynx/Mouflon/Little Bustard

Place of the Trip

Sheila – La Lancha
Judith – Dehesa de Solana/the mountains
Dawn – Encinarejos (river walk)/Dehesa de Solana
Pete – Encinarejos (river walk)/Dehesa de Solana
Steve – Encinarejos (river walk on my own)
Judy – Encinarejos (river walk)/Dehesa de Solana/Bat cave
Linda – Encinarejos (river walk)/Sierra de Cazorla
Julian – Drive to Banos de Encina/Dehesa de Solana

Magic Moment

Sheila – The two Little Owls canoodling on the rock
Judith – Seeing the first Lynx/Ibex silhouette on the skyline
Dawn – Seeing the Lynx
Pete – Seeing the Lynx/Spanish Ibex coming down the hill
Steve – Finally seeing a Lynx and the Eagle Owl
Judy – Seeing the Lynx/Grieffon Vultures running up the hill
Linda – Seeing the Lynx/Little Owl in the hole/the company
Julian – Spanish Imperial Eagle, Eagle Owl and Iberian Lynx within 20 minutes

BIRDS

Shelduck
Mallard
Gadwall
Shoveler
Eurasian Teal
Egyptian Goose
Red-legged Partridge
Little Grebe
Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Great Egret
Grey Heron
White Stork
Greater Flamingo
Osprey
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Booted Eagle
Golden Eagle
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Red Kite
Marsh Harrier
Common Buzzard
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Peregrine
Common Kestrel
Moorhen
Common Coot
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Common Crane
Black-winged Stilt
Lapwing
Black-tailed Godwit
Green Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Tawny Owl (heard only)
Little Owl
European Eagle Owl
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Iberian Green Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Calandra Lark
Woodlark
Crag Martin
House Martin
White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail

Dunnock
Robin
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackcap
Sardinian Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Cetti's Warbler
Common Chiffchaff
Firecrest
Wren
Great Tit
Blue Tit
Coal Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Iberian Grey Shrike
Iberian Magpie
Magpie
Jay
Carriion Crow
Jackdaw
Red-billed Chough
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Serin
Siskin
Common Crossbill
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Iberian (Pardel) Lynx
Rabbit
Red Deer
Fallow Deer
Mouflon
Common Pipistrelle
Greater Mouse-eared Bat
Schrieber's Bat
European Otter
Spanish Ibex
Red Squirrel
Algerian Mouse (Julian only)

REPTILES / AMPHIBIANS

Iberian Wall Lizard
Spanish Terrapin
Moorish Gecko

BUTTERFLIES / INSECTS

Small Heath
Small Copper
Provençal Hairstreak
Western Dappled White
Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Cleopatra
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Small Tortoiseshell
Wall Brown
Long-tailed Blue
Egyptian Grasshopper
Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Honey Bee

PLANTS

Common Jonquil
Hoop Petticoat Narcissus
White Hoop Petticoat Narcissus
Brown Bluebell
Astrogallus luscitanicus
(milkvetch sp)
Storksbill
Common Fumitory
White Asphodel
Field Marigold
Gagea (sp)
Romulea (sp)
Spurge
Rosemary
French Lavender
White Asphodel
Green Hellebore
Stinking Hellebore
Gum Cistus
Bermuda Buttercup
Wild Asparagus
Strawberry Tree
Mastic Tree
Wild Olive
Mountain Ash
Aleppo Pine
Scots Pine
Holm Oak
Cork Oak