

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura Winter
29 Nov – 4 Dec 2017

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Sara and Roy Cowley, Pam and John Hall and Connell

Day 1: Our guests arrive ahead of schedule and are greeted by the smiling face of Julian in the arrivals hall. A quick hug and “hello” is followed by heading out into Madrid airport’s parking area where our very nice minibus is parked. We head out on to the city’s ring road and soon enough we are following this to the main highway to Badajoz. The usual fare of House Sparrows, Spotless Starlings, Collared Dove and Eurasian Magpie are seen as we head away from the capital, south and west towards Extremadura with the snow-capped Gredos Mountains on our right.

We drive through miles of agricultural land seeing our first Red Kites, Common Kestrel and a couple of Common Buzzards as the Holm Oak dehesa begins. We stop for a hot drink with Roy finding a rather groovy Great Green Grasshopper on the café window and the short break is very welcome. Our journey resumes as the sun is starting to dip below the horizon and Connell spots a couple of Great White Egrets in a roadside pool and Sara sees our first small group of Common Cranes heading to their roosting points. It is now dark and for the final hour we chat amongst ourselves until Julian exits the motorway at Trujillo and takes the minor road to our fabulous accommodation.

Ten minutes later we pull in and park the minibus but it's too dark to fully appreciate our surroundings, although John and Pam had been here in April and Roy and Sara a few years earlier – it still looks fabulous in the dark. We are greeted by our lovely hosts Juan Pedro and Belen, and after a short introduction to the house we are allocated our rooms and a meeting time of forty minutes later for drinks and nibbles – superb. We all reconvene at the appropriate time and enjoy a pleasant drink with some Spanish entremeses, which is such a nice gesture ahead of dinner. Belen announces the meal is ready and we are treated to our first night’s cuisine, which sets the bar really high. This finishes with the usual offer of an acorn liqueur and whilst enjoying this we listen to JP and Belen's son Alejandro play the clarinet, which is superb. Julian goes through the next few days, pointing places out on the map and setting the scene for the holiday. However, it's been a very long day and soon enough we are all heading to our rooms and a good night sleep in this fabulous accommodation.

Day 2: We have our first delicious breakfast at 8:00am as the light outside starts to take over from the dark and it looks like it's going to be a fine day. After this we get our essentials ready and convene at the minibus outside a little before 9:00am. It is our first daylight view of this wonderful accommodation and the surrounding

area looking out over green fields, hedgerows and dry stone walls to the historic city of Trujillo in the distance. Being a rural hotel we are seeing birds all around the extensive grounds with Iberian Magpies, Spotless Starlings, Goldfinches and House Sparrows on offer. Roy does well by finding a handsome male Sardinian Warbler along with a few Blackcaps and a Great Tit near the van. Soon enough though we are driving out to the main road and turning south towards Zorita.

Even this early there are a few raptors about with several Red Kites, Common Buzzard and Kestrel seen before arriving at this small town where we turn off towards Guadalupe. The whole topography of the landscape now changes, with more open steppe being encountered and fields used for grazing livestock. In the distance we can see a huge reservoir; we drive closer and continue to the edge of the huge Embalse de Sierra Brava. Here we stop and alight the van into a stiff cool breeze coming from the north, which makes viewing difficult. There are big rafts of wildfowl on the grey water with Shoveler clearly dominating the scene but even at this distance Julian picks out Wigeon, Teal and Mallard. Great Crested Grebes are gathered in small flotillas, along with a couple of Marsh Harriers creating a bit of havoc amongst the throng. It is pretty quiet but we also see a cracking Iberian Grey Shrike, a few Meadow Pipits, Crested Lark and Julian points out an interesting flower to Sara and Connell, which is a lovely Friar's Cowl (*Arisarum vulgare*), in full bloom. Julian indicates its time to move on and round the reservoir we drive until we are in a better position for the ducks. We now easily find much the same species but with Sara, John and Julian manning their telescopes we soon add Pintail, Gadwall, a single Common Pochard, several Shelduck, Greylag Geese and Cormorants. However, the most unusual find by Julian is an Avocet swimming in amongst the hundreds of wildfowl. We are now also starting to see our first Common Cranes, which is not unexpected with thousands in the area. Roy and Connell have been off with their cameras, enjoying the challenge of snapping one of the many Common Chiffchaffs overwintering in this beautiful area. Still we have a lot to do and time is already moving on.

The journey continues initially round the reservoir adding Common Coot to our day's list along with good views of Stonechat, Linnet, Magpie and our first gorgeous Hoopoe found by Pam. In fact this initial sighting of Hoopoe produces three in total, feeding on the damp earth at the side of the road. We start to leave the 'embalse' behind and circumnavigate the flooded rice fields that have now taken over. We make another stop for several Griffon Vultures sat on the ground or on low granite rocks, looking like they had just fed. We scan the 'paddies' and see our first Little and Cattle Egrets, Grey Herons, Common Snipe, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. There are hundreds of Common Cranes here, dotted about the muddy fields, bugling away and looking incredibly charismatic – being an incredible sensory spectacle. We honestly don't know which way to point our cameras! Connell doesn't make this any easier by pointing out some White Storks and Julian sees a Great White Egret, something not normally associated with this area of Extremadura.

We continue to drive through to Madrigalejo and just beyond the town we again turn into a network of rice fields, following one of the dykes adjacent to the track. There are more Common Cranes, lots of cranes in the damp fields but the minibus disturbs them and the sight and sound of them leaving the immediate area is tremendous. Some do remain and John is keen to try and get some video so we stop in just the right place as a female Bluethroat is seen along with a wee flock of Red Avadavats (Roy thinks these are fab) and a few Hoopoes. It is getting towards lunch time so we drive on slowly around the fields getting more point-blank views of cranes before continuing south to Vegas Altas and the bridge over the Rio Gargaligas. From the densely vegetated river of phragmites and Willow we can hear Cetti's Warblers, Moorhen and even a Water Rail squeal but a White Stork on its nest nearby diverts our attention. This is unfortunate as Julian notices something just below him in the river and says urgently "Otter" as he dives. Obviously not happy with our presence it heads away downstream with just a couple more of us seeing it briefly before disappearing completely.

The picnic is unpacked and while we stand around watching either side of the bridge we get glimpses of Red Avadavat, Cetti's Warbler, Chiffchaff and a couple of Marsh Harriers quarter the area. Julian then spots a male Hen Harrier in the distance and we get some decent views before it's lost behind the huge Eucalypts lining the waterway. Some of us move position and continue to watch as it flies across the agricultural fields being then joined by a female, which is brilliant - a fitting end to our lunchtime detour.

Vegas Altas is a small village surrounded by paddy fields with one road in and the same road back out, which we drive slowly. There are of course Common Cranes, lots of Common Cranes but also the expected Chiffchaffs, Spanish Sparrow and at least three more Green Sandpipers. John spots a pipit towards the back of one flooded field that is quickly identified as Water Pipit by its larger size (than Meadow), strong white supercilium and black legs - a good find. Also in this very productive wet field we see a Grey Wagtail and as we drive back along the track towards the village a Kingfisher is spotted by Julian but flies before we can get the cameras ready. It is now mid-afternoon and reasonably warm for November in Extremadura, being slightly uncomfortable in the minibus. This is a bit of a surprise as normally it would be cold being exposed to the winds from the north and west!

We now leave the Vegas Altas area and make our way back to Madrigalejo and turn off again along the huge irrigation channel that services these fields during the late spring and summer months. We are seeing much the same species as we drive slowly along towards the village of Palazuelo but stop as there is a huge murmuration ahead but not Spotless Starlings. The cloud of birds swirling about must involve well over 5000 individuals and an incredible sight but it isn't until they have landed en masse in one of the nearby bramble bushes do we realise they are all Spanish Sparrow, which is just fantastic and something Julian had ever seen previously. We of course, stay a while getting the full impact

of this swarm of passerines and as they pass by you can hear the rush of wings - surely one of the highlights of the short break.

Eventually we move on reaching the village and heading again north to Campo Lugar turning off at the village back out on to an area of agricultural steppe, a complete contrast to what we have been previously seeing. We stop for a couple of Red-legged Partridge at the side of the road and also see quite a few Calandra and Crested Larks. We carry on along the road stopping occasionally for looks at larks, pipits and Corn Bunting, with Julian scanning the fields for bustards. It takes a little time but we eventually manage to find a flock of 22 Great Bustards at the back of one of the fallow looking fields. We want to see these in the telescope so we get out at the side of the road and watch these magnificent stately birds standing like sentinels on the ridge. Julian is scanning the drystone wall and picks out a Little Owl, which is superb even if it is a little distant (possibly in the next time zone!). It is starting to get cold being late afternoon so we return to the warmth of the van and as we slowly work our way along the road Julian, first hears then sees a group of four Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying. Sadly they just keep going and not all of us get to see them even briefly.

It is now time to leave and we continue to the main Zorita road where we had started the day and north to the town. We pass an Otter dead in the road, which is such a shame and quite a surprise as it's quite a journey to the nearest body of water. The drive back is easy and we arrive at the hotel around 6:00pm, giving us enough time to freshen up ahead of meeting for the daily checklist and our delicious evening meal.

Day 3: Today is not only the beginning of the year's last month but also Connell's birthday and Julian is all prepared at breakfast. A card has already been bought and signed by everyone with him making a fuss of our friend when she arrives at the table, which is lovely and really appreciated by Connell. It is an overcast start to the day but hopefully the weather will not deteriorate too much later on, as is forecast – still it is not going to stop us enjoying our day out on the Santa Marta plains. After breakfast and once ready we set off through Trujillo and then out to the huge open grassland towards the historic village of Monroy.

Julian knows the favoured fields but still scans the area as we are driving along seeing the usual Crested Larks, Meadow Pipits and Corn Bunting. At a junction we pull in and park by a stone cross and almost immediately a couple of male Great Bustard fly right across in front of us – what a fabulous sight being the heaviest flying bird in the world and looking like a B52 bomber in the air. A good start but we are soon out of the vehicle and scanning the adjacent weedy fields for signs of movement on the ground. However, it is John who sees a distant large flock that is flying just above the horizon, which look really good for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Thankfully a small group peel off and land at the back of the field we are scanning through so our scopes are aimed in their direction. It is not long before they are found slowly moving through the vegetation and in the telescope they look amazing with their fabulous cryptic plumage that blends

in with their surroundings. We all agree that these are a stunningly beautiful bird when seen well. There are also Golden Plover here running around the pasture and we get a good view of some that fly right above our heads. Julian has already mentioned how Pin-tailed Sandgrouse can look similar in flight and we concur after seeing them both in quick succession.

After a wee while Pam and Sara suggest we have a little walk down a track leading through these fields and we haven't got far before Pam says "here – two more sandgrouse". There is a pair and they are really close in comparison to the previous birds and through the telescope (especially John's) we can see the feather by feather detail in the sunshine and that is just superb – we all agree this is the best view we have ever had of this potentially tough species. Eventually the birds stir and fly to the back of the field joining their colleagues so we decide to walk on a little more to the end as it is so nice and peaceful with the song of Calandra Lark. We also get good views of these as some are actually song-fighting and we see the diagnostic black underwing with white trailing edge quite clearly. It is now time to move on as we still have lots to see and do.

The next stop is only minutes away and again we are looking for steppe species in the nearby fields but a very confiding Dartford Warbler gives us a real treat. A gorgeous male is hopping around some gorse and broom only metres from where we are stood and allowing our photographers to get an image or three. It is fabulous to see this normally shy, skulking warbler being totally unconcerned by our presence. After a while it moves off and our attention is back on finding other things with Julian pointing out a couple of Black Vultures followed by a group of Griffon Vultures, giving us a nice comparison of the wing shape between them. This area has a great vantage point and scanning the drystone walls produced a pair of Little Owls, which are slightly closer than yesterdays and overhead we see several Red Kite circling round along with a couple of Marsh Harriers.

It is now getting towards lunch and Julian is keen that we have our picnic at a very nice bridge over the River Almonte, so off we drive. The landscape soon changes from open steppe to Holm Oak dehesa and after about thirty minutes we are winding our way down to the river and park overlooking the bridge. The picnics are handed out and even though it has again become overcast it's lovely to sit and enjoy them in this very peaceful situation. We have a little time here so some of us wander down the river to look at the old watermill seeing Barbel in the fast flowing water. Julian hangs back and goes to the bridge where he finds a Dipper further down the river plus a handsome male Grey Wagtail with the White Wagtails on the rocks below. As the group join him he points these out and a Kingfisher spotted by Roy zips through, followed by Julian then finding a male Blue Rock Thrush right at the water's edge. A Rock Bunting is nearby as we can hear its weak, insipid call from the shale bank but we cannot find it despite some serious searching by John and Connell. Maybe next time?

It is a shame but we need to move on from this tranquil and very productive spot, the weather now is looking more threatening. In fact by the time we have reached Monroy it has started to drizzle. We continue past the lovely village out again into extensive Holm Oak dehesa seeing parties of Common Cranes feeding on the fallen acorns. We stop for photographs being so close but frustratingly they fly off before we are all ready or hide behind a tree – cannot believe such a large bird can be so elusive! We keep going along these amazing tree-lined Roman roads when a dark long-tailed mammal crosses the road ahead – Egyptian Mongoose. It is a beast too, being almost the size of an otter. We stop to see if it will reappear but instead another smaller individual crosses the road behind the minibus, which is only seen briefly by a couple of us but still incredible. Julian tries some high-pitched squeaking but the animals are not interested and never reappear but we could clearly see their shape and size on the initial animal – what a bonus.

On we go to Jaraicejo and then up to the sierra behind the town, which is covered in Gum Cistus and White Broom, not dissimilar to heathland in the UK. The rain is now falling more steadily so we don our wet weather gear and set off down the track to an ancient Cork Oak wood. There are Thekla Larks here, calling and flying up from the open ground and at the wood we stand under the canopy and listen. Julian points out some calls and song, getting to see Nuthatch and Short-toed Treecreeper plus Chaffinch, Blackbird, Great and Blue Tits. Then Connell spots a movement below and there is another Egyptian Mongoose and this time we all manage to see it before disappearing into the brambles – again this is very unexpected in this type of habitat being more usually associated with water. There is water though, falling from the sky and it looks like it is not stopping anytime soon so Julian decides we head back to the minibus – nobody is arguing!

As there is still some time we drive out to the Belen Plain where we again drive slowly through this open land of steppe and agriculture. The rain is now heavy and we just watch from the van as we cruise along the road which dissects this area. In the small ponds we see a Green Sandpiper and some Mallard but a lovely female Hen Harrier is fantastic and well worth the effort of visiting here in such poor conditions. Late afternoon we head back to our hotel as we are dining out tonight in Trujillo at the historic 'plaza mayor' with its fine architecture and statue of Pasaguero the Conquistador of South America. Sadly it continues to rain heavily all evening so we opt out of wandering around the main square with Julian ultimately bring the bus to the restaurant door so we would not get too wet.

Day 4: Breakfast is again at 8:00am with a scheduled departure an hour later - we are in no rush today as we are spending the day (until dark) in Monfragüe National Park. We head north on the motorway turning off for Monfragüe at Jaraicejo and as it's such a nice morning we decide to return again to the sierra. Without the previous miserable conditions it looks like a completely different place and almost immediately Roy spots an Iberian Grey Shrike on an overhead wire, looking brilliant in the morning sunshine. John is pleased to get some video of this lovely

bird followed by good views of a Thekla Lark sat on some dead broom. We now set off along the narrow track through the cistus seeing Stonechat, Sardinian Warbler and another Thekla Lark. We stand this time in the edge of the Cork Oak woodland searching and listening for woodpeckers but nothing appears. In fact, we only see Chaffinches and Spotless Starling with one of the latter doing a very passable mimic of a Greenshank! So we walk slowly back to the van seeing another Iberian Grey Shrike and as we slowly drive out Julian spots a few more birds sat on the wires. Thinking they are something a wee bit different he stops to check them with his binoculars and announces they are mostly Woodlark with a single Rock Sparrow – brilliant. Once we have all managed a decent look we leave this sierra and head for Monfragüe.

We have a very pleasant drive to the National Park and soon enough we are entering its boundary, stopping for a small group of Griffon and Black Vultures. We are not exactly sure what they are doing here until we realise they are next to a well-eaten carcass – certainly not our choice of a well rounded breakfast! The next place we stop is much more pleasant and scenic, a layby near the Arroyo de la Vid. Julian breaks out our morning coffee and cake, which is most welcome and while we are enjoying this break we find a lovely male Black Redstart, Crag Martins overhead and a Cirl Bunting trilling from one of the small trees nearby. Following this we continue along the road to our next stop at the famous Pena Falcon, a huge limestone pinnacle-shaped crag that supports a good number of breeding Griffon Vultures. It is also renowned for the other raptors that breed nearby and whilst we are there we enjoy an avian spectacle. There are several Black Vultures amongst their much commoner cousins and Red Kites are constantly hanging around. Connell spots a Peregrine above the pinnacle and when a young Golden Eagle flies over it gets mobbed by this individual – you sometimes just don't know where to look. In the nearby trees and bushes there are lots of Common Chiffchaffs, Blackcap, Great and Blue Tits. A cracking male Blue Rock Thrush looks resplendent sat prominently on the limestone ledge and grazing on the adjacent hillside are five Red Deer. It is just a fabulous scene and you could arguably spend all day here and not get bored. However we still have lots to see and do with lunch fast approaching.

We drive on through the park, crossing the Rio Tajo before getting to the hydro-electric dam wall where we park at the Mirador de Malavuelta, which overlooks the base of the wall. Here, pine forest dominates and Connell is really pleased to find a small patch of Cauliflower fungi, looking like tiny buds of cotton wool – fascinating. We enjoy our bocadillos, fruit and snacks at the picnic tables and Julian calls “Hawfinch” as this large finch dashes through without stopping. John is checking the herons and egrets in the river announcing he has found a Black Stork, which is a great record for the time of year. We put our scopes in its direction and there, stood with a couple of Great White Egrets is this scarce wintering stork. While we are watching Sara says “There are deer in the water” and sure enough we can see five Red Deer wading across the shallow water – good stuff. Once we have finished lunch Julian suggests a better look at the stork and we all agree this would be good and so involves returning to another picnic

site a short way back up the road. Now we can see the stork in more context being an immature bird as it's quite brown, unlike the adults who possess this gorgeous translucent green sheen to their plumage.

Our next and final stop within the park is Portilla del Tietar, another huge limestone pinnacle rock famous for its breeding Spanish Imperial Eagles in the mature trees nearby. It is also a place to try and see European Eagle Owl but November is not a great time of year as they are not singing yet, still we are staying until dark on the off-chance. We arrive mid-afternoon with about two hours to wait until dusk so we settle down and watch the antics of the vultures around the rock, keeping a constant look-out for any large 'Aquila' eagles. It is pretty quiet as the day comes to a close with a small group of Long-tailed Tits moving through and an impressive flock of Iberian Magpies coming to roost at the base of the rock. As it starts to get dark large groups of Cormorant are heading down river and there are a few bats around that are both Greater Horseshoe and a Pipistrelle (sp) but sadly no owls or Eagles, which is a great disappointment.

Julian calls time when we can barely see anything and we return to the minibus and our long drive back to San Clemente. As we wind our way back through Monfragüe, we see another Red Deer, this time in the middle of the road. Julian and Connell also get a brief view of a Red Fox in the headlights. We don't hang around in getting back, knowing we are resigned to a very late dinner after our long day out in the field.

Day 5: Our final full day and the target species is Little Bustard, which is proving to be elusive during these past few days despite being in their winter flocks. Breakfast is scheduled for 8:00am and about 45 minutes later we are leaving the hotel with broken cloud and sunshine overhead. Julian has already informed us the road to Santa Marta has been closed off for roadworks and this is the site for Little Bustard, so we need some luck. We set off and take the motorway to Caceres but take the second exit for Santa Marta de Magasca, which also leads through some prime steppe habitat. Along this second minor road we then turn west towards Caceres as an information board suggests this could be good for birds and the previous weekend during the Speyside Wildlife conference a young Spanish Imperial Eagle had been seen here. Today it is quiet with just a few Golden Plover and lots of Lapwing, with plenty of Calandra, Crested and Skylarks flying around. At one small pool there is a Green Sandpiper and overhead we see Red Kites, Common Buzzard and a Marsh Harrier. We are spending a lot of time scanning these extensive fields and at one place find a newly dead sheep, which could be interesting later in the day.

We decide to head for Santa Marta village and check out the usual road from that side finding it to be a lot more accessible and it is Saturday – so Julian goes for it. Actually it isn't initially too bad and even the small number of work's vehicles we do see take no notice of our intrusion. The extent of the road renewal is astonishing for such a minor single track road, which was previously tarmacked and good enough to use, our fears being the amount of disturbance given to the

wildlife in the immediate area especially the steppe breeding species such as bustards and sandgrouse. Eventually we reach 'happening corner' traditionally a good place to find Little Bustard but it's nearly impossible to watch from here due to huge piles of earth blocking the track. We do stop on the road being built as it's very quiet with little traffic and scan but find no birds at all, which concerns Julian and how they will fare the following spring. A herd of cattle is also preventing our progress further on foot so it is back in the bus and slowly we make our way back towards Santa Marta.

Julian now decides to take the track to the Finca, which again has traditionally been quite productive and away from the major road works going on. This is a good decision as we quickly find a small group of Great Bustards showing very well. Then a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse fly past calling and join some others already feeding and almost hidden from view. We continue to drive this bumpy track stopping and scanning at good vantage points with Julian then finding a few Black-bellied Sandgrouse in the fields, which look great in the telescope. We stay here a while also enjoying some of the speciality species we had come to Extremadura to see. On we go and suddenly Julian says "Little Bustard" as three birds with broad white wing patches and a duck-like flight speed across in the distance. Most of us see them well enough to know what they are but it's a poor view and we watch them land in a very inaccessible area, which is a great shame. Astonishingly it is now nearly lunchtime so Julian stops at a point with a good view and hands out our picnic, which is really nice as the sun is still shining and we are away from the roadworks, looking over this pristine steppe. While the rest of us eat our lunch, our guide continues to scan the fields, ridges and sky finding a lovely male Marsh Harrier along with more vultures and Red Kites. Then he shouts "Spanish Imperial Eagle" but before we can react this young bird dips below the skyline and disappears behind the distant dehesa. Julian cannot believe this as no one else has seen it and despite continually searching for the next half an hour we still see nothing. Looks like our luck is out with one of Europe's rarest eagles!

We are keen to keep trying and our exit is in the direction it was last seen so once we are ready we climb back into the minibus and set off back along the track to the roadworks. We reach the place where we think it was flying around, there are other raptors here but not the one we had hoped for, so Julian decides we need to get back on to the tarmac as the rain seems imminent and actually the weather is changing as cloud builds and a cold wind blows across the region, which will not help. After a few minutes we move on safely getting back out on to good road at Santa Marta and retracing our steps to the motorway. We are keen to revisit the carcass and this proves a good move as we can see from a distance a couple of Griffons sat on telegraph poles. In fact there are now 26 Griffon Vultures and a single huge Black Vulture sat on the ground near the sheep, having already feasted. Not the most pleasant scene in the world but still fascinating and hugely important.

It is now raining quite heavily but we make one last ditch effort to see Little Bustard as we drive through to the Belen Plain. This is even less productive than the first time we were here as the rain has become heavy and viewing almost impossible unless you are sat in the front. Julian is very conscious of this and also that this is our last day and we need to ready ourselves for departure the next morning. He decides to do the sensible thing and return to the hotel where we can have some leisurely downtime and a hot drink ahead of doing the final checklist and dinner later that night – no one is complaining. As it happens we meet early to complete the checklist and chat about the plan for the next day and traveling back to Madrid. Juan Pedro has arranged a wine tasting session for us which is both interesting and informative, being an excellent way to end the short break. Our final meal is again superb and we are then treated to a musical finale by Juan Pedro and Belen's very talented children (Marina and Alejandro) – making for another memorable night.

Day 6: It would have been nice to have a slightly more leisurely start to the day but we are on a mission with two target species – Spanish Imperial Eagle (again) and Black-winged Kite. Julian had already given us his plans for this morning last night but the dark clouds and fog determine a change to this. After breakfast we get our luggage together and say our fond farewells to Juan Pedro and Belen – they have been amazing hosts once again and a credit to this accommodation. We are all sad to leave.

Just before 9:00am we are on the motorway heading north towards Madrid in less than perfect conditions but soon enough we have seen the ubiquitous Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel and Griffon Vulture before we reach the craggy peaks of Monfrague. However, as planned we don't turn off towards the National Park but continue on the motorway, exiting towards Saucedilla and the Embalse de Arracampo. As we drive alongside the reservoir Julian says we need to keep an eye out for Black-winged Kites and minutes later he is coming to a halt in the road, pointing at an adjacent telegraph pole. There on top is a gorgeous (and close) Black-winged Kite, we cannot believe our luck as the first images by Roy and John are rattled off. Our van isn't great and a couple in the back cannot see properly so Julian turns the minibus off the road into a gateway, which is perfect. Sadly though the kite did not think so and flies off and away to the next pole a bit further away. However, this enables Julian to dig out his tripod and John produces his Swarovski 'bazooka' to give us all an absolutely 'swaro-tastic' image of one of Europe's rarest breeding species – just fabulous. It is smiles all round as we watch it alight from the telegraph pole and continue to hunt in the distance.

Julian now suggests we drive through to Monfrague and try for the Spanish Imperial Eagle, there is no argument. We are on the road to Serrejon when Pam spots another Black-winged Kite over an adjacent field that lands on one of the many short poles sticking up from the ground. Sara then exclaims "There's two!" as we come to a halt and watch from the open bus. John is videoing this as the pair attempt to mate but the female is having none of it! We cannot believe our

good fortune and continue on towards Serrejon, only then for Roy and Julian to spot another above a small olive grove, a total of four Black-winged Kites in a short space of time and distance – incredible.

Our drive continues through some classic dehesa of gorgeous Cork and Holm Oak seeing lots of Chaffinches, Azure-winged Magpies, Collared Dove and several Mistle Thrush. Eventually we reach the stream that creates the edge of the Monfrague NP and continue again to the parking area near Portilla del Tietar. It is now 10:15am and Julian says we have a little over an hour to get lucky and see our second target before setting off for Madrid Airport. The searching begins and we enjoy the Griffon Vultures that are sat around drying their wings after the recent rains and even now there is a damp feel to the weather but nothing too bad. Connell does well spotting a female Marsh Harrier, which gets our pulses racing and a few Great White Egrets and Cormorants fly down the Rio Tietar, which is much higher than our previous visit. Crag Martins are everywhere and we can hear the distinctive bugling of Common Cranes in the distance which is quite haunting. Then John says “What's this coming left?” and Julian immediately reacts with “Spanish Imperial Eagle!” as it lands in the top of a small Holm Oak – brilliant. The swaro scope is trained on this Iberian endemic and one of the rarest raptors in the world, getting again superb views of its bright golden head and shoulders. We all enjoy our fill of this magnificent bird before deciding to pack up and wander back to the van in readiness of a two hour journey north and east.

Most of us are actually sat waiting in the bus whilst Julian gives a kettles of Griffons and an odd Black Vulture one last scrutinise and says “Spanish Imperial Eagle” Sure enough there, amongst the vultures is another adult bird that proceeds to leave the pack and fly towards the ‘portilla’ where the other is sat. We watch, photograph and video this until it disappears and leave the scene very happy with our morning's work. The drive out to the motorway is punctuated with a brief sighting of Kingfisher and Grey Wagtail but stopping for a hot drink (and fuel) is far more welcome.

Once ready and with plenty of time we start back to Madrid as the weather now becomes a lot more inclement and staying like this for the whole two hour journey. The time passes pretty quickly and soon enough after another ‘top-up’ fuel stop we are safely returned to Madrid Airport's terminal 1, heralding the end of a super week in central Iberia. We say our thanks and goodbyes to Julian, John and Pam who are staying in Spain before heading to the check-in desk and our flight back to the UK.

Species of the trip

Connell – Cauliflower Fungus

Sara – Hen Harrier

Roy – Red Avadavat

Pam – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse

John – Common Crane

Julian – Dartford Warbler

Place of the trip

Connell – Vegas Altas Rice fields

Sara – Vegas Altas Rice fields

Roy – Pena Falcon

Pam – Vegas Altas Rice fields

John – Vegas Altas Rice fields

Julian – Monroy Road

Magic Moment

Connell – Spanish Sparrow murmuration

Sara – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the sunlight

Roy – Close view of the Dartford Warbler

Pam – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the sunlight

John – The flicks of Cormorants flying over on an evening

Julian – Finally nailing the Spanish Imperial Eagle before leaving for the airport

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Great Egret
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
White Stork
Black Stork
Greylag Geese
Common Shelduck
Gadwall
Mallard
Northern Shoveler
Common Pochard
Eurasian Teal
Red Kite
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Common Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Moorhen
Coot
Common Crane
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Avocet
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Common Snipe
Green Sandpiper
Black-headed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove

Little Owl
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Calandra Lark
Woodlark
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
Water Pipit
White Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Dipper
Robin
Bluethroat
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Zitting Cisticola
Cetti's Warbler
Blackcap
Sardinian Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Common Chiffchaff
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed Treecreeper
Southern Grey Shrike
Iberian Magpie
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow

Spanish Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Goldfinch
Linnet
Hawfinch
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Red Deer
Red Fox
European Otter
Egyptian Mongoose
Greater Horseshoe Bat
Common Pipistrelles

OTHER THINGS

Speckled Wood butterfly
Rhinoceros Beetle
Great Green Grasshopper
Honey Bee
Friar's Cowl
Cauliflower Fungi