

Holiday Highlights
Extremadura
25 March – 1 April 2017

Guides: Julian Sykes

Guests: Michael Dixon & Helen O'Donnell, Andrew Barnett, Alison Glaisher and John Bruce

Day 1: Despite arriving an hour late into Madrid Airport we are in good spirits as we meet up with John who has flown up from Malaga that morning. Collecting the rental bus goes seamlessly and a little after 5:00pm we are heading out of Spain's capital west towards Extremadura having already seen our first White Stork, Black Kite, Spotless Starlings, Woodpigeons and House Sparrows. As the landscape turns to agricultural fields with the Sierra de Gredos to the north we add Kestrel, Common Buzzard and Barn Swallow to the list. However, in Castilla La Mancha at a small stand of Stone Pine there are lots of Magpies but Julian spots something different – Great Spotted Cuckoo, quickly followed by a second which is also seen by Andrew and Mike.

After a couple of hours and finding roadside Red-legged Partridge, Corn Bunting and Crested Lark we stop for a quick comfort break, which is most welcome. On we drive, still west into Extremadura where the topography again changes to 'dehesa' with Holm Oaks scattered across the grassy plain. The sun is starting to set with both Great Cormorant and Great Egret seen flying to roost and more White Storks, this time sat on their huge nests. The mountains of Monfragüe loom larger and we turn south to Trujillo as the sun sets with a fabulous 'shepherd's delight' red sky. We eventually reach our hotel just before 8:00pm and quickly get our rooms allocated being ready for dinner 30 minutes later, which is superb. Both the locally grown food and conversation are excellent but we are now quite tired so Julian quickly gives us a plan for the next day and we retire back to our rooms, knowing the clocks were going forward tonight – it is all a little confusing!!!

Day 2: Incredibly we are all at breakfast on time and in pretty good spirits, even the non-morning people amongst us. We have plenty of time to enjoy what's on offer and ready ourselves ahead of leaving at 9:00am. Sadly the forecast is right and it's a cold, grey and wet start with the likelihood of an improvement as the day progresses. We head south towards Zorita through some heavy showers, seeing our first gorgeous Azure-winged Magpies as we leave the hotel, Common Buzzard on a roadside telegraph pole plus White Storks, Barn Swallows, Corn Buntings and Kestrel along the way. At Zorita we continue south now through some more open farmland/steppe countryside until we turn off to Campo Lugar.

The song of larks, Corn Bunting and Zitting Cisticola fill the air as we drive along slowly checking the fields. A Hoopoe flies up but quickly disappears and along the roadside verges we see Meadow Pipit, Crested Lark and Linnets. Julian then

announces he can see a group of Great Bustards ahead and once we drive a short distance to park safely at the side of the road, we eagerly jump out and set up the telescopes and there are these huge majestic male birds looking incredibly stately in their gender group. It is raining but we either don't care or don't notice as we are transfixed by these wonderful avian creatures – the heaviest flying bird in the world. They settle down after a while of being aware of us and start to display a little but not the full-on 'foam bath' effect of turning themselves inside out! Julian is keen to find other things and we see a couple of Marsh Harriers quartering the fields along with several Lesser Kestrels and a Red Kite. Whilst scanning the area with his telescope he happens upon a shape on a far stone wall and says "got a Little Owl" which is superb. Andrew really enjoys this, especially after finding a second individual near the original bird, which shows even better once the rain has stopped. Keen to move on now, we climb back into the bus but only travel a few hundred metres before getting out again, this time for Calandra Larks. These are all round us song-fighting, sat on nearby rocks and displaying, which is awesome. Then Julian points out another group of male bustards and this time they are displaying properly to each other, which Mike finds hilarious. We are completely engrossed in the sight and sound of this whole area, quite unlike anything we are used too in Britain. Julian checks his watch and cannot believe it's 11:00am and time for our morning hot drink, which is most welcome. Once ready we climb back into the bus and set off back to the main road.

A quick visit to the Embalse de Sierra Brava shows there is very little here with just a few Great Crested Grebes, Great Cormorant, Mallard and a Little Egret along the water's edge. So on we continue down to the Zorita rice fields, an extensive network of drained sections given over to the production of rice. We initially follow a main irrigation channel seeing a couple of Green Sandpipers fly up and John spots a Brown Rat. We have again frustratingly brief views of another Great Spotted Cuckoo along with Stonechat, Sand Martin, another Hoopoe and a big flock of Azure-winged Magpies. Julian again points out some more Great Bustards taking our tally to 50+ already and Helen does brilliantly finding a handsome male Woodchat Shrike. It is here where we again alight the vehicle as Julian has spotted a Red-rumped Swallow but in fact there are several along with House Martin plus a few Tree Sparrows and a Robin. It is with surprise Julian says there are a couple of Black Vultures on the hillside and we get good scope looks at Europe's largest raptor. Conscious of the time we have to move on continuing our circular drive, stopping occasionally for new birds such as Little Ringed Plover, Cattle Egret, Raven, White Wagtail and Goldfinch.

Eventually we are back at the main road stopping for lunch at the picnic site of Madrigalejo. An Iberian Shrike shows well on the adjacent solar panels, which makes up for the cold and damp conditions, then as we are leaving a couple of Red-legged Partridge turn up. The weather is now improving as we check a couple of small ponds near the town but apart from a few Moorhen and some stunning male Serin next to the minibus it's pretty quiet. Another loop of the rice paddies is again productive as John points out our first Spanish Sparrows followed

by Julian spotting a wee flock of Red Avadavats – one of our target birds for the day. In the end we see plenty of these cute little introductions from the Indian sub-continent as they hide in the bottom of the phragmites. Time is moving on so down to the Rio Gargaligas we drive to check the river from the small bridge. It is a lovely half hour with Julian seeing a Kingfisher speed off up the river, Ali gets to actually see a Cetti's Warbler and we hear a Water Rail squeal. A White Stork close by gets some photographic attention as does another Iberian Shrike, especially from Mike and John before we need to move on.

The weather is pretty good now apart from a cold wind from the north and back in Madrigalejo we stop again at the side of the road at another wet field. This is also very good with the addition of two Common Snipe and an absolutely superb male Yellow Wagtail (of the race *thunbergi*), every stop seems to produce something new! It is now late afternoon and Julian has one more quick visit in mind so back to Campo Lugar seeing the same Great Bustards but also more Black and Red Kites, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harriers and Lesser Kestrels. We follow the minor roads to Alcollarin with Ali spotting a male Common Redstart from the van before turning off to the embalse (reservoir). We initially see lots of Common Coot, several Gadwall, Mallard, Little and Great Crested Grebes – with the latter having a flotilla of over 50. A Greenshank is a good find along with Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpiper and out in the open water we see Black-headed Gulls, Cormorants and lots of hirundines, a great way to end the day. On the way out we stop for a White Wagtail and then in the village a group of 11 Lesser Kestrels flying around together and nesting House Martins is a nice surprise. We get back to the hotel for 6:00pm in plenty of time for a freshen up before the checklist, a welcome drink and our delicious evening meal.

Day 3: Another 8:00am breakfast with today leaving just 45 minutes later – how streamlined are we? Julian has informed us of our destination, the Embalse de Arrocampo back up the motorway towards Madrid. It is sadly another pretty inclement day with a cold wind blowing across the region but we are undeterred. The drive goes quickly enough and as we pass through dehesa we see the usual White Storks, Common Buzzard, Black and Red Kites. Eventually we are through the mountains of the Sierra de Monfragüe and out at the reservoir associated with the Nuclear Power Station at Almaraz. Here we first stop at the small visitor centre (with facilities) where Julian picks up a hide key and we all make use of the excellent information leaflets on the area.

We are keen to see Black-winged Kite and Julian gleans some information from the girl in the centre but before we head off our guide spots six Spoonbills flying in the distance. We get back in the minibus and head off through Saucedilla and turn off towards our first set of pools checking the sky, pylons, irrigation stands and trees as we drive slowly on. Already we are seeing both Black and Griffon Vultures, along with Eurasian Kestrel, Marsh Harriers and lots of kites. There are also hirundines everywhere, mainly Barn Swallows, Sand and House Martins feeding over the water and extensive phragmites beds. We park at the furthest

hide and quickly check this pool finding both Great and Little Egrets, Moorhen and Mallard before setting off back along the road on foot.

It is actually really nice to be having a walk despite the showers and cold wind as we are somewhat protected by the trees and bushes. An Iberian Shrike shows really well on an irrigation pole, followed by John spotting our first of several Alpine Swifts moving ahead of a band of rain. A Quail is heard singing 'whet mi lips' from a vegetated field but will not reveal itself and overhead Julian points out our first Booted Eagle of the tour. We are not finding any Black-winged Kites so Julian suggests we return to the van and try elsewhere. There is no argument and as we get back our guide again checks the pool and finds a Purple Swamphen, which is brilliant. Unfortunately, it quickly disappears back into the reeds so we squeeze into the small 'observatorio' with our morning hot drinks and wait. Thankfully it does come back out and we all manage to get a decent view. We now get back in the bus and set off back along the same route stopping to look at another good pond with a muddy edge. This proves to be very productive as we add to our list a pair of Red Crested Pochard, Black-winged Stilt, Common Sandpiper and lots of Cattle Egrets. The return to the visitor centre continues driving slowly along the road seeing lots more of the same species but also a fabulous flock of Spanish Sparrow including some very handsome males. We stop adjacent to another reed-fringed pool and Helen asks "what's this running along the track?" Julian and Ali latch in to it quickly just before it disappears and confirm it as an Egyptian Mongoose – superb.

Julian again sets off but quickly stops. He has seen something interesting and his expression changes once he has seen it through the binoculars – Black-winged Kite. It is in the distance sat on top of a pylon surveying its domain and what a find. We quickly dig out the telescopes and get some pretty good views of one of the rarest European raptors there is. We stay a little while until it alights and drops down to the adjacent bushes being a little closer. These looks are more than satisfactory with Julian wanting to move on a few minutes later as a much-needed comfort stop is required. It is definitely smiles all round, especially from Andrew who was really keen to see one here. We stop again at the visitor centre before walking out to one of the hides surrounding this massive reservoir. The reeling of a Savi's Warbler can be heard in the adjacent phragmite bed but cannot be located but we do see a Purple Swamphen giving much better views than the previous one. At the hide we barely all fit in so Julian and Mike stand outside and independently we get good looks of another Swamphen and a couple of Purple Heron. Another Savi's is singing and this time Julian finds it and fixes a telescope on it and its great views all round. This is superb but its lunchtime and we decide to try another hide to have our picnic.

A short journey and we are again squeezed into this second hide overlooking another reed bed hearing and seeing much the same species so we enjoy our 'bocadillos' without too much disturbance. Andrew has pointed out lots of egrets at the back of the pool along with a couple of Great White Egrets flying over. The willow trees are busy with passerines, particularly Common Chiffchaffs but

an Iberian Chiffchaff causes some identification discussion as its not singing, which is a key feature. Mike and John enjoy watching a pair of Blue Tits carrying nest material to the hide roof where they are building as it looks bizarre being bright orange. Julian excitedly points out a Glossy Ibis flying through, which is another very good bird to see in Extremadura, making for a fabulous lunch break.

It is time to leave and we decide to head off back south but in a circular route through Serrejón. First we deposit the hide key back at the information office and make full use of the facilities before driving off through the Holm Oak dehesa. It is mostly a scenic drive but we do get brief looks at Mistle Thrush and Woodchat Shrike before returning to the motorway and our route through the Sierra de Monfragüe. With a couple of hours spare Julian drives on to Jaraicejo where we head up to the sierra of mainly Gum Cistus and White Broom. Here we go for a short walk down to gorgeous Cork Oak woodland seeing several Thekla Larks along the track. At the edge of the wood, Andrew finds our first Sardinian Warbler of the week but we don't get lucky with Dartford, which is unusual. There are the usual Chaffinches, Serin, Great and Blue Tit but overhead we see Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Black and Griffon Vultures. As we are about to leave Julian first hears then sees a male Sub-alpine Warbler finding it in a nearby small tree but it's difficult to see. Most of us get a decent look before it dives back into cover but unfortunately not all – fingers crossed for more opportunities.

It is now late afternoon and we have a date with Trujillo this evening as we are eating out from the hotel in this historic city. We drive back to the hotel and ready ourselves for leaving at 6:30pm going straight to the 'plaza mayor' where a fabulous statue of the 'Conquistador Pasaguero' resides and routes up to the fortified walls and castle building. Lesser Kestrels and White Storks are all around but there are also a few Common Swifts, Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martin, which are seen by most of us during the hour interlude before dinner. At 7:30pm Julian collects us again and transports us to the edge of town and a wonderful restaurant that has opened specifically to accommodate us, which is awesome. After our fabulous meal we head back towards San Clemente but making an unsuccessful detour for Scop's Owl although picking up an inebriated old hitch-hiker maintained the interest of another brilliant day before getting back to base and a good night's sleep.

Day 4: Julian has requested a slightly earlier breakfast to be on the road earlier than the last two mornings and we duly oblige leaving just after 8:30am on this beautiful sunny morning – all the signs are good. Mike helpfully cleans the minibus windows while Andrew finally finds his own Red-rumped Swallows that he's happy with. Sadly Helen is feeling a little under the weather but this fabulous morning goes some way to keeping her spirits high. We leave the accommodation and head towards Caceres on the motorway turning off for Santa Marta. The dehesa soon opens out into classic steppe as we make our first stop with Andrew pointing out a lovely male Northern Wheatear before we had even got out. According to Julian this is traditionally a safe bet for Little Bustard but not today and it's likely

due to the roadworks that are going on further along. However, we stay for about 30 minutes as there is a massive lone Black Vulture sat on the ground fabulously illuminated in the morning sunshine and photos are required.

We need to leave as the target species are not here so on we drive checking a couple of places that overlook swathes of open plain but can only find the ubiquitous Corn Bunting, Calandra and Crested Larks. On we drive but only a short distance turning off on to a metaled road towards a finca and almost immediately finding a group of Great Bustards with some in full display. Julian moves the minibus into position and we climb out at a safe distance with incredible views of these majestic birds through the telescopes. It is fabulous to watch their bizarre 'foam-bath' display in such good light as they become almost all white, like a giant snowball with legs! As most of us are enjoying this incredible event Julian continues to scan the surrounding fields and finds a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – just superb. We train our scopes on these smaller beautiful birds and start to enjoy their cryptic plumage, which makes them so difficult to see on the ground. This field also has sheep and incredibly the shepherd turns up in his ancient Fiat and both bustards and sandgrouse take off. It is a brilliant sight and sound as they fly past and round with the sandgrouse calling continuously. We stay a wee while longer but Julian is keen to move on as the heat-haze is starting to kick in making observation through a telescope difficult.

We head along the track seeing Stonechats, Red-legged Partridge, Black and Red Kites before stopping at another rise in the undulating landscape. We have seen some more pretty close Great Bustards but they are temporarily forgotten about as Julian says he's found a few Black-bellied Sandgrouse – our luck is definitely in. It is superb to see both these species again in the same field of view even if it was just through the telescope. Our attention is now on trying to find the fourth member of today's target species, which is Little Bustard but we know that could prove difficult. While we are scanning this special landscape we manage to see Black Stork, Kestrel, Black and Griffon Vulture flying overhead but sadly not Little Bustard. It is time to leave.

We eventually drive through Santa Marta de Magasca after a wee detour for more roadworks and through dehesa until we reach the bridge over the river. This is our morning coffee stop and most welcome too. Not only is there refreshments and nibbles but in the river we see lots of Spanish Terrapin and there's lots of hirundines around with great views of Red-rumped Swallow and Crag Martin. Helen spots a Red Fox and Andrew finds a Cetti's Warbler out in the open after Julian points out a Goshawk circling with a couple of Griffon Vultures. It is very relaxed as we watch the butterflies and flowers with Ali finding a lovely Sawfly Orchid along with a Southern Brown Argus feeding in some French Lavender. It is hard to break ourselves away but we must and back in the van we continue on the road towards Monroy stopping at the junction to scan for Montagu's Harrier. This is again a wonderful area and also a brilliant vantage point, consequently making it a great place to watch for raptors and it's

no surprise we soon see both vultures, both kites, Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Lesser Kestrel, Short-toed Eagle and a cracking Black Stork. However, it's John who hits the 'back of the net' by spotting a couple of male Little Bustards flying into the adjacent field. We are able to track them on the ground and manage to get good views through our telescopes despite the heat haze and the distance. It is smiles all round as this is now a tricky species being in heavy decline throughout the region. It is getting towards lunchtime but Helen sees a mid-size pale raptor coming low over the fields before climbing high – a gorgeous male Montagu's Harrier. We cannot believe our luck as we watch this beautiful raptor fly through probably still on migration and putting the icing on what is an excellent day already. This event cannot be surpassed so we climb back into the minibus and head off again towards Monroy.

Lunch is taken at another gorgeous river crossing, this time the Rio Almonte and we enjoy our picnics in glorious sunshine. Like all these stops we spread out looking for wildlife with Julian, John and Ali checking the shale bank and finding Large Psammmodromus (lizard) and Moorish Gecko (in a culvert) with Brimstone, Small Heath, Small Copper and Clouded Yellow Butterflies. Overhead there are plenty of birds that include a single distant Egyptian Vulture, another Black Stork, Short-toed Eagle and a very handsome male Rock Bunting. Mike, Helen and Andrew stay near the river where they walk along to the 'molino' and see much the same species as the previous river stop. It is 3:00pm when we leave the lunch site and Julian informs us that we are going to make a slow circular drive back down to Trujillo. This is very pleasant through some fabulous countryside of oak and pasture seeing another Red Fox, hearing Woodlark, great views of Woodchat Shrike and another brief look at a Mistle Thrush and Booted Eagle before reaching the walled city. It is now late afternoon as we visit the famous Trujillo Bullring where we stand for a while watching the antics of 10+ Lesser Kestrels that breed in this historic building – just awesome and a wonderful climax to the day.

Around 5:00pm we start back to our accommodation and upon arrival Julian suggests a wee walk along the track that goes beyond the hotel. Most of us engage this activity and have a leisurely stroll that lasts about an hour. It is not very productive but we do see Hoopoes, Short-toed Tree-creeper and a pair of Sardinian Warblers although it's a field of Champagne Orchids, another Large Psammmodromus and a cracking Large Tortoiseshell that highlight the walk. Soon enough we go for a very welcome shower after a long, hot day before another delicious meal after the checklist and the following day's plan.

Day 5: After breakfast we meet at the vehicle on this glorious morning with bird song filling the air, with Hoopoe, Spotless Starling, Azure-winged Magpie, Serin, Blackbird and Corn Bunting vying for our attention. Today we are going to one of Spain's premier national parks – Monfragüe and after Julian's description we cannot wait. The drive north is lovely seeing buzzards and kites along the route but our first highlight is a large Cork Oak full of Griffon Vultures just outside Torrejon El Rubio. We now enter the park and just beyond the Arroyo de la Vid we pull in to a layby to see what's around. This is quite productive but

a Wryneck sings once and doesn't show, which is a little frustrating. However we do see other things with Andy pointing out our first Black Stork of the day along with some of the commoner species.

It is already getting warm as we continue along the road through the park turning off for the castle and winding our way up to the base where we park. We have a walk to the top from here but first we admire the views out over the extensive Holm Oak dehesa. There are Red-rumped Swallows and Crag Martins nesting in the small caves nearby and as we slowly make our way to the castle we hear and see Blackcap, Iberian Chiffchaff and Chaffinches. The final steep steps are taken slowly but the views are absolutely breath-taking and even more so at the top where we can see across to the snow-clad mountains of the Sierra de Gredos. We spend a little time to ourselves here taking a few photos, with John and Julian getting a good look at a cracking male Rock Bunting. We enjoy the vultures flying past and admiring them from above before we all convene for a 'team' photo from the thick castle wall. After a while we start to leave and Julian finds a male Blue Rock Thrush that sadly disappears quite quickly although he assures us that we will see more. We now start back down the steps to the bottom with Ali, Andy and John refunding the thrush, with Mike and Helen trying to get some great scenic shots of the surrounding area. Back at the bus we drive back down to the main road and a short distance before stopping again.

We are now at one of the park's prime sites – Pena Falcon and there are Griffon Vultures everywhere along with a few Black and also several Black Kites and Ravens. Julian spots a Peregrine circling with these raptors and we all manage to get a good look it being joined later by a second bird. We have our morning hot drink and snack here before packing this away and walking a short distance to look at the famous Black Storks nest at this location. The storks are not currently home but there is plenty more to see as we are entertained by a pair of male Blue Rock Thrush having a Mexican stand-off and seeking the attention of a nearby female – just brilliant. Also here we see a couple of Black Redstart and great eye level views of Red-rumped Swallows, even if the rump is more peachy than red! One of the Black Storks returns to the nest and in the superb morning sunlight we can see it's actually iridescent green as it flies past – what a gorgeous bird. It lands on the nest in the cave and soon after we are walking slowly back to the van with Julian then pointing out both Booted and Short-toed Eagles drifting over the pinnacle.

On we travel along the winding roads dropping down to the huge Rio Tajo and its associated huge bridge across it. Again Julian says he has a treat for us that doesn't involve anything rare but just a spectacle. He points in the direction of the bridge and we stand watching the amazing sight of hundreds of House Martins milling around that are nesting under it. There are also Alpine Swifts, which look outrageously big in comparison to the martins and lots of Black Kites – it is a spectacular scene. The butterflies are also starting to fly now and we see Holly Blue, Red Admiral, Brimstone and Small Heath. We again return to the minibus and Julian hears a low scratchy song that he recognizes as Sub-alpine

Warbler and after a little time we get to see this bright looking skulking sylvia warbler. It is getting towards lunchtime so on we go stopping for a quick break at Villarreal to confirm our dinner reservation and make our meal choices ahead of later that day.

We then drive to another viewpoint (Mirador de Tajarillo) where we take out our picnics and enjoy them in the now warm sunshine, apart from Helen who sensibly prefers the shade. This is actually productive for her and Mike as they get to see a couple of Red Deer at the side of the water. We however have to satisfy ourselves with another Black Stork and a pair of Egyptian Vultures soaring round over the crag. Greenfinches are found by John in the parking area and Andy enjoys the song of a Linnet. We have been there a wee while when Julian shouts "Bonelli's Eagle" pointing excitedly skyward and there they are, a pair of adults soaring round. He manages to get everyone on to them before they start to drift off south and away, which is brilliant as it is (according to our guide) arguably the most difficult eagle species to see on this holiday. Lunch is finished but just before we leave Ali finds another Sub-alpine Warbler in a small oak and we get a very good view of this very handsome male.

It is now mid-afternoon and Julian is keen to visit Portilla del Tietar in the hope of finding a Spanish Imperial Eagle amongst other things. He need not have worried because as we get out of the minibus he spots one flying along the ridge line right past where we are standing, he cannot believe the luck we are having. We walk to the watch-point, marveling again at the antics of the Griffon Vultures nesting on the limestone pinnacle. Ali spots some lovely Hoop Petticoat Narcissus - all the time there are Blue Rock Thrush flying back and forth. Julian goes to check if the Spanish Imperial Eagle eyrie is visible pointing out a Spanish Festoon butterfly that keeps flying through. The eyrie is viewable so we move position and scopes to look at the adult female hunkered down. It is not long before we hear the approach of the male and over the next 30 minutes we see an interchange in prey, the female taking a rest from her nest duties and the male taking over before they change back for the rest of the afternoon. It is fascinating to watch this interaction between these two fabulous birds of prey and how they defend and look after their charges. Late afternoon we have to leave as an early dinner is beckoning.

Our path back through Monfragüe National Park continues stopping briefly now at the Mirador de Malavuelta for a short walk through the pine woodland. Andy finds a lone Long-tailed Tit, which is unusual and a little further we get views of Nuthatch moving through the canopy. It is just then that our keen-eyed guide looks up and shouts "Golden Eagle" and there high above our heads is an immature Goldie, what an absolute treat as we watch it slowly circle round before drifting off. Julian is beside himself as this means we have seen all five species of breeding Spanish eagles in one day, which is no easy achievement and confirms how wonderful this place is. We now need to go back to Villarreal and have dinner ahead of our evening's entertainment.

We get there right on time and over the next hour and a half we enjoy a delicious meal and great conversation about such a cracking day. A little after 8:00pm we set off back to Portilla del Tietar seeing a couple of Red Deer at the side of the road. Once there we ready ourselves with a few other Spanish observers for an Eagle Owl vigil. As the sun is setting bats start to appear with good numbers of Greater Horseshoe and just a few Pipistrelles being seen in the evening twilight. Then as it gets dark the Spanish start getting excited and they have found the male Eagle Owl sat on a ledge at the top of the huge pinnacle rock. Julian gets on to it and starts putting scopes in its direction but it's difficult to see being a dark bird against a dark background. John and Andrew manage a half decent view before it decides to fly right and disappear, which is a bit of a shame but still it's been a great experience. It is now dark and we still have a long drive so we must leave but first we identify a few constellations that are above in this beautiful cloudless sky. The drive takes a while and Julian is still keen we try for Scop's Owl and heads there first but again not a sound from this other site, which is quite concerning. It is very late when we pull into the hotel's parking area and Ali spots a few more Pipistrelles around the lights. This is the end of an incredible 15 hour day, with some very special moments.

Day 6: Despite the late finish we are still at breakfast for 8:00am and leaving the hotel 45 minutes later on another lovely day. We drive straight to Jaraicejo and up to the sierra above the town, where we quickly see Thekla Larks, Iberian Grey Shrike and Corn Bunting in full song. We again walk down towards the Cork Oak woodland but this time we tease out a cracking male Dartford Warbler, getting excellent views of it sat on the White Broom. There is no woodpecker activity at the wood but we do see Short-toed Treecreeper, Chaffinches, Long-tailed, Great and Blue Tits. John finds a fabulous male Sardinian Warbler followed by Andy hearing then seeing a Sub-alpine, which was great after he struggled seeing the previous ones. We have another busy day ahead so we soon start back and now we can hear a Woodlark in full song. Back at the bus we are about to leave when Julian spies a bird on the overhead wire in the distance so unpacks the telescope. It is what he had expected and hoped for – Woodlark and our first look at one. We want to get closer so start walking towards it but sadly it drops to the ground and out of sight before we get a really good close look – c'est la vie. Back at the bus we are now driving out when Julian sees another 'wire bird' and stops to check it. This time it's a Rock Sparrow and he can also hear a few more in from the track and out again we get. This is much more successful as we eventually get fabulous views of Rock Sparrow through the telescope that are probably nesting in a nearby Holm Oak. The morning drinks etc. have also been unpacked and as Julian says "that's our day's itinerary shot now" but no worries we are having a good time.

Eventually we do leave and set off along the 'Ruta de las Villuercas' stopping suddenly for a Short-toed Eagle sat on a pylon, which then alights and gives us fantastic looks in flight. We reach our first bridge over the Rio Almonte where almost immediately we find Iberian Wall Lizard followed by Orange-tip butterfly and a pair of Grey Wagtails in the river. It is glorious here now as Andy and John

spot Sparrowhawks in different places at the same time, we are actually not sure which way to look. Helen then picks out another Short-toed Eagle on a distant pylon and all round we see and hear Cetti's and Sardinian Warblers, Blackcap, Serin, Wren and Stonechat - just brilliant and so peaceful with next to no traffic. On we move as it's nearly lunchtime already and Julian now takes us to another idyllic spot – Cabanas del Castillo. We park in this hill-top village with views out over the sierra and sit, have our picnic and just drink it all in. There are a few birds around (like everywhere) and we enjoy watching a pair of Sardinian Warblers nest building and a female Black Redstart. After lunch we walk up through this quaint village and out the back towards the huge rock that holds this ancient Moorish castle. Julian leads us along a track seeing Blue Rock Thrush, a cracking male Black Redstart and a Large Psammmodromus lizard. However, we are not prepared for the visual experience when we come out from behind the rock into this gorgeous hidden valley with just astounding views over this beautiful landscape. We just want to stand and look but Julian isn't happy unless he's pointing out wildlife and shows a mega-distant Egyptian Vulture sat on the ridge, in fact we think it could even be in the next time zone (or Portugal)!!! A group of Alpine Swifts are zipping around chattering as they go and on the walk back Ali sees a few butterflies with Wall Brown, Small Copper and Western Dappled White being common.

Reluctantly we have to leave this fabulous place and drive back the way we came turning off on to a minor road to Alcantara. In fact it's so minor it's not even on the map, although it should be as we pass through miles of Holm Oak dehesa before reaching another bridge over the Rio Almonte. We of course stop here and walk out to the old bridge with Julian finding a Whinchat along the vegetated edge of the river. We are doing our own thing with Mike being very pleased to have identified his own Booted Eagle amongst the constant Black and Red Kites, Griffin and Black Vultures. Julian and Ali are keeping their heads down finding some wonderful stands of Barbary Nut along with Southern Speckled Wood and Large White butterflies. Andy spots another Black Stork flying amongst the raptors followed by John hearing a Cirl Bunting in full rattling song, although it takes Andy and Ali to find it low down in the broom before it flies out of sight. We reconvene on the road bridge for a wee while before setting off again finally to the Belen Plain. This is another famous Extremadura site but now it's not so productive but superb views of Great Spotted Cuckoo makes the trip worthwhile along with Calandra Larks, Little Owl and Lesser Kestrels. As we are tired, a little earlier than normal Julian leaves Belen and drives slowly back to the accommodation where we enjoy some 'down-time' before meeting to do the checklist and another wonderful dinner prepared by our very own Belen.

Day 7: Sadly our final full day and it starts with overcast cloud and a cold wind blowing but Julian's keen to stay with the plan of heading south again in the hope of migrants. After breakfast we meet at the minibus and set off a little late as our guide has managed to scald himself with the hot water for mid-morning drinks – thankfully not too badly! It's an easy drive to Zorita ticking off the usual White Storks, Corn Bunting, Spotless Starling and Black Kite at the side of the road.

On the way out of the town we stop at a small pool and find our first Shoveler of the morning along with a Great Egret, Little Grebe and Black-winged Stilt. There are a few Lesser Kestrels around the church in Alcollarin but a smile crosses Julian's face as we drive towards the dam wall. He can hear a Nightingale singing across the field and we stop and get out to listen. The sweet song resonates through the chorus of Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, Stonechat, Serin and Goldfinch. We decide to walk nearer and we are pleasantly surprised to find a small stream lined with vegetation and full of birds. Andy sees a couple of Common Waxbill on the small track but they quickly disappear and across the stream we watch Cetti's Warblers dance, a Kingfisher zips through and we get looks at Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe, Common Cuckoo and Sardinian Warbler watched by Mike. Andy also then briefly sees a Nightingale (as there is probably two) followed by Julian and Helen getting a briefer look. This is such a wonderful place we lose track of time – in fact Andy says he could stay here all day!

However we do need to move on and return to the minibus and drive up to the edge of the water where we see another Woodchat Shrike, but much closer and the expected Great Crested Grebe, Black-headed Gull, Grey Heron, Little Egret and lots of hirundines hawking insects over the water. On we drive to another dam wall that divides a small reed-fringed pool, which is also very productive as we set up our scopes on a purpose built jetty. Over the next two hours we almost continuously add new species to our already extensive bird list. Initially we find lots of Shoveler, Mallard, Gadwall, Little Grebe, Cormorant, Common Coot and Cattle Egret but there is much more. Julian points out five sleeping (what else!) Spoonbill, followed by a pair of Tufted Ducks and an Egyptian Goose (wherever that came from) followed by Andy and John spotting a few Garganey, which is superb. There is a Cuckoo sat in a dead tree with pairs of Ruff and Greenshank being disturbed by a couple of passing fighter jets. A scratchy song announces a Sedge Warbler in a small reed-bed and Mike spots a Kingfisher moving between the two bodies of water. It is fabulous.

Late morning we decide to break out the refreshments, which is most welcome and we sit at the picnic table listening to another Nightingale close by. It is starting to get warm now and Julian is conscious of the time and we need to leave this wonderful and productive area. The drive out is slow with Ali spotting both Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrikes as she watches from the front seat before we are back on the main road. We head away from the 'embalse' to Campo Lugar and beyond, where we turn off towards the 'bustards area'. Along here we spot a Northern Wheatear, Marsh Harrier, Stonechats, Crested and Calandra Larks. There are several Great Bustards in their usual place and we enjoy our last look at this magnificent steppe specialty. It is such a pleasure to enjoy these incredibly stately birds move across the short grass and one memory that will last a long time. Julian again needs to head off as it is lunchtime and he has a particular place in mind.

At the Embalse de Sierra Brava we park and walk to the covered picnic tables. There is, as usual, plenty with our lunches supplemented with further nibbles

including quail eggs no less! We never stop looking for wildlife and Julian is now in raptor mode pointing out close Booted Eagle, a more distant Short-toed Eagle plus Griffon and Black Vulture, Common Buzzard, Black and Red Kite. A small colony of Lesser Kestrels is in a nearby derelict building and just before we leave, we stop to try our hand at photographing them – not a great success for some of us. After this we slowly drive along the edge of the dam and then the irrigation channel until we reach the ‘drying out’ rice fields. One of the wetter patches is quite good as we find Little Ringed Plover and more herons and egrets but it's back to the main road we head looking at how the agricultural practices are changing with a bias towards olive oil production – this is big business at the moment.

Julian is keen to visit the services in Madrigalejo and after quickly dealing with this we check again the small wet field at the south of the town. As we arrive Julian spots a large flock of wee birds and what he assumes must be Red Avadavat so we park and get out to check. John and Andy have their scopes up quickly and Julian uses theirs. He only sees one bird, which is a Waxbill and is really surprised. There is now some time before we find more and again Julian is convinced the main population must be avadavats as he's never seen a big group of waxbills together. He's wrong as a scope is eventually trained on the main group and they are all Common Waxbills much to the amusement of Helen and Mike who are listening to the debate with great interest. Still it is another new species to add now.

Mid-afternoon we leave the town and drive back north but don't get too far before Julian screeches to a halt shouting “Bee-eater”. Most of us see this colourful bird crossing the road in front of us and away low over the fields – we need to follow it. Julian takes the track and parks near where it was last seen but sadly nothing, which is very frustrating for our guide. It is really hot now and we return to the minibus and main road but only for several minutes as we again turn off on to the Zorita rice fields. Initially it is quiet but then Julian hears a very familiar call – Bee-eaters and there they are - 20+ of these beautiful migrant birds, obviously just arrived into the region and looking pristine. They sadly fly off into the distance but we have all had a good look and even through the telescope they are brilliant. We stay around here watching with Andy seeing a Little Ringed Plover along with both Spanish and Tree Sparrows. Then Julian hears another distinctive call and shouts “Pratincole” pointing at a large House Martin-like bird flying over our heads and away. Sadly it does not hang around but joins more in the distance and we watch as they continue to migrate north.

Very happy we get back into the bus and drive along the track stopping for a few more European Bee-eaters sat very close to the road in a large tree, allowing for some very passable images to be taken. We now drive around to the adjacent track where we do much the same, stopping occasionally to scan and finding Lapwing, Woodchat Shrike and a small flock of Red Avadavats, which just disappear when they land in the phragmites. It is now late afternoon and time to leave for the hotel as we need to pack and have a good think about our

highlights of the week ahead of the checklist that night. We cannot believe how well we have done on the final full day of the week, when traditionally you can struggle to add new species to the list and got eight.

Day 8: We wake to a blanket of fog outside and there is a depression inside at the breakfast table too as we know we must leave. The day starts in pretty much the same format as previous apart from Julian loading our main cases into the minibus and we say “thank you and goodbye” to Juan Pedro. JP, Belen and Alejandro have been wonderful hosts, almost treating us like one of the family. We leave just before 9:00am as planned and drive out to the motorway and north away from Trujillo. As we travel the weather is slowly clearing and once through the tunnel it is another glorious day although there is another strong cold wind.

At Almaraz we turn off as we have an hour to spare and first go to use the facilities at the Arrocampo visitor centre before driving through Saucedilla and out towards the hides. Black-winged Kite has been requested and this is duly delivered pretty quickly with both Julian and Andy finding independent ones. We again take the same track as the previous day and park in almost the same place with Helen then relocating one not far away in an old Holm Oak tree. This individual then flies up to join its mate on the overhead powerline and proceeds to come a little closer allowing for Mike and John to get a few images. This is a terrific way to end the week but we still have a little time so we check out a couple of pools with the first revealing a singing Reed Warbler. At the second there are Black-winged Stilts and John spots a couple of Snipe with Ali finding a Green Sandpiper. It is now time to leave.

We are soon back on the motorway and heading east along the snow-clad Sierra de Gredos east to Madrid. Julian shouts “Great Spotted Cuckoo” as this large long-tailed bird flies right past the minibus – we are going to miss Extremadura! En-route we see the usual kites, vultures and kestrels along the road stopping just inside Castilla La Mancha for a hot drink. It is now full speed to the capital and taking the relatively quiet (compared to the M25) ring road we reach Barajas with five minutes to spare. We say our fond farewells to our guide and driver for the week before letting him go to sort out the rental bus and his own transfer by train to Valencia.

Species of the Trip

Helen -Cetti's Warbler

Mike – Purple Swamphen and Great Bustard

Ali – Black Stork and Spanish Imperial Eagle

Andrew – Black Stork and Little Owl

John – Great Bustard

Julian – Ashy-headed (Yellow) Wagtail

Place of the Trip

Helen –Embalse de Alcollarin

Mike - Embalse de Alcollarin

Ali – Cabanas del Castillo

Andrew – Andy's Patch (Embalse de Alcollarin)

John - Embalse de Alcollarin

Julian – Monfrague N.P.

Magic Moment

Helen – The waxbill debate!

Mike – Raptor interaction at Portilla del Tietar

Ali - Alejandro playing the clarinet for us

Andrew - Arriving into Spain/now being able to recognize Red-rumped Swallow, Alpine Swift etc.

John – Seeing the male Montagu's Harrier come floating through

Julian – Finally seeing the European Bee-eaters!

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Great Egret
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Grey Heron
Purple Heron
Spoonbill
Glossy Ibis
White Stork
Black Stork
Egyptian Goose
Gadwall
Mallard
Garganey
Northern Shoveler
Red Crested Pochard
Tufted Duck
Black-winged Kite
Black Kite
Red Kite
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Black Vulture
Short toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Common Buzzard
Spanish Imperial Eagle
Golden Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
Booted Eagle
Common Kestrel
Lesser Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Quail (heard only)
Coot
Moorhen
Water Rail (heard only)
Purple Gallinule (Swamphen)
Great Bustard
Little Bustard
Black-winged Stilt
Lapwing
Collared Pratincole
Little Ringed Plover
Common Snipe
Common Sandpiper
Ruff

Black-headed Gull
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Feral/Rock Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Stock Dove
Collared Dove
Great Spotted Cuckoo
Common Cuckoo
European Eagle Owl
Alpine Swift
Common Swift
Common Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Nightingale (heard only)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Calandra Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
House Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Ashy-headed (Yellow) Wagtail
Meadow Pipit
Wren
Robin
Black Redstart
Common Redstart
Stonechat
Whinchat
Northern Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Mistle Thrush
Zitting Cisticola
Cetti's Warbler
Eurasian Reed Warbler (heard)
Savi's Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Sub-alpine Warbler
Blackcap
Common Chiffchaff
Iberian Chiffchaff
Penduline Tit (heard only)
Long-tailed Tit
Blue Tit

Great Tit
Coal Tit
Short-toed Treecreeper
Nuthatch
Southern Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Magpie
Jackdaw
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Spanish Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Red Avadavat
Common Waxbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Iberian Hare (Julian only)
Red Deer
Red Fox
Wild Boar
Egyptian Mongoose
Brown Rat
Greater Horseshoe Bat
Pipistrelle (sp)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Iberian Water Frog (heard only)
Natterjack Toad (heard only)
Spanish Terrapin
Moorish Gecko (Julian only)
Iberian Wall Lizard
Large Psammmodromus

BUTTERFLIES

Orange-tip

Large White

Western Dappled White

Brimstone

Spanish Festoon

Large Tortoiseshell

Southern Speckled Wood

Clouded Yellow

Red Admiral

Holly Blue

Common Blue

Southern Brown Argus

Small Heath

OTHER STUFF

Carpenter Bee

Rhinoceros Beetle

Oil Beetle

Hoop Petticoat Narcissus

Barbary Nut

Champagne Orchid

Sawfly Orchid