

Central and Northern Spain – May 2007

Leaders: John van der Dol and Eustace Barnes.

The weather forecasts from Spain had been less than encouraging when our group of thirteen birders left Heathrow bound for Madrid and on arrival, it seemed as though the reports were correct as a steady rain was falling. Very quickly, however, as we travelled west, the rain cleared and we were blessed with blue skies and hot sunshine for the whole of our ten day stay in this beautiful country. The first part of our journey took us to Extremadura and as we travelled we made occasional forays from the motorway to view species such as Red and Black Kite, Montagu's Harrier, Griffon Vulture and Booted Eagle. Already too, we were beginning to see the profusion of wild flowers that would make our holiday more than just a birding break. After several hours of travel, we reached the Vina las Torres, an attractive rural hotel set in quiet countryside near Trujillo. Here we were extremely well looked after and the owners took particular care to serve us authentic Spanish food, beautifully presented, together with local wines.

After a good night's rest, we drove into the Spanish steppes, an area of stony plains, grassland and scrubby vegetation. We negotiated a narrow bumpy track, first seeing several Little Bustards and then rounding a corner we were amazed to see a group of about 15 Great Bustards, displaying to each other and flying short distances, allowing us to see their great size and striking plumage. We continued to drive through similar terrain for the rest of the day, picking up many other birds such as Stone Curlew, Hoopoe, Bee-eater, Roller, Calandra Lark, Red-rumped Swallow, Blue Rock Thrush, Tawny Pipit and Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrike – the list was already impressive!

The next day, we visited the Monfrague area, where almost perpendicular rock faces provide convenient roosts and nesting places for a wide variety of raptors. Birdwatchers are well-catered for with a series of lookout points being provided to ensure that good views are obtained by all. Here we saw Black, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, nesting Black Stork and several eagle species such as Short-toed, Booted and Bonelli's. Driving on, we were thrilled by the sighting of a Spanish Imperial Eagle and then a magnificent Eagle Owl which was nesting on the cliff side opposite the road. Sightings on the journey also included a Great Spotted Cuckoo and on our way home, we visited a wetland area where birds seen included Zitting Cisticola, Savi's and Cetti's Warbler, Spoonbill, Purple Heron and Little Bittern.

On our final day in this area, we revisited the Bustards and we also saw good numbers of Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse before we drove to the nearby town of Trujillo. Here some people explored the narrow streets and the castle whilst others relaxed with a cool drink in the attractive town square. In the evening, we ventured out again, attempting to drive up an extremely narrow country road in search of nightjars. Eventually it was decided that the road was in fact too narrow to continue and the drivers had to gingerly reverse back down in the increasing gloom and park in the village. Trying to ignore the barking of the nearby guard dogs, we walked back up the lane and were eventually rewarded by the sight and sound of a Red-necked Nightjar, an exciting end to the first part of our holiday.

The following morning we set off up the motorway but we had to pull over rapidly onto the hard shoulder when a Black-winged Kite was spotted, hovering over a nearby field. A long drive took us in an easterly direction towards the La Mancha area of Don Quixote fame. We, however, had come in search of the White-headed Duck which was duly located and in the splendid reserve at Miguel Estaban we also saw, amongst many others, Greater Flamingos, Red-crested Pochard, Kentish Plover and innumerable Black-necked Grebes. Saddest sight of the day was seeing a Little Grebe lose her two young chicks to a marauding Black-headed Gull. As we still had a long journey ahead of us, we reluctantly had to leave and were soon skirting Madrid on the ring road before arriving at the small town of Turegano, our base for the next two nights. Here we stayed at a small but comfortable hotel with good views towards the magnificent castle which dominated this small town.

As we were not staying in the area for long, the next day was spent in locating some of the special birds of Segovia, in particular Dupont's Lark. We headed out towards Pedraza, stopping at stretch of stony, parched land with scrubby vegetation. Here Eustace was able to locate a Dupont's Lark for us as it ran along the ground but it kept a very low profile. We then visited Canyon del Duraton, a scenic area where a deep gorge has been cut through the countryside and a hermitage overlooks the water below. We sat for a while in the hot sun, watching the vultures soaring above the cliffs opposite and spotting a Peregrine Falcon in flight overhead. We returned to the hotel for lunch and a short siesta before heading out again to an area of pine forest where we saw Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch and Crested Tit flitting about in the trees. Going through the mountain pass to another valley, we stopped for provisions before having a picnic high up in a forest clearing. As we journeyed home, we stopped to see Nightjars, this time of the more familiar European variety.

A few hardy souls got up early the next morning, hoping for another sighting of Dupont's Lark and were rewarded by seeing the larks both in song flight and standing up on the rocks in clear view. After breakfast, we continued to travel northwards into the Pyrenean foothills, eventually arriving at the ancient hilltop village of Berdun. Here we stayed at the Painting School, in a building full of character and interest. On our first evening, a Scops Owl was heard in the distance and it was soon lured up to the village, where it flew up to the church tower and seemed quite happy to be literally in the spotlight. After we had enjoyed our freshly baked croissants at breakfast the next day, we drove out to a nearby valley and enjoyed good views of Cirl Buntings and Red-backed Shrikes before heading off towards higher ground at Gabardito. After a short but strenuous walk, we were thrilled to locate our target species of Wallcreeper and it was nice that everyone in the group was able to see these fascinating little birds. On the journey back down the valley, some of the group also saw Black Woodpecker and Lammergeier, although others of us had to wait to catch up later with these special birds. We ate our picnic lunch amongst scenery reminiscent of an alpine meadow, this impression being enhanced by the group of nearby cattle with their cowbells. In the afternoon we drove into higher territory, right up into the Pyrenees and through the Belagua Pass. Here there were patches of snow on the ground and Alpine Choughs were present, wheeling around in large unwieldy flocks. An Alpine Accentor obligingly sat in full view for close-up photographs and several Citril Finches foraged along the roadside. The colourful wild flowers also added to the spectacle and it was with some reluctance that we left this beautiful spot.

We began the following morning by visiting the forest around the monastery of San Juan de la Pena. Here the rest of us caught up with Black Woodpecker before we headed off again, only to come to an abrupt halt when a pair of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes were spotted by the side of the road, giving us excellent views. We drove on to Riglos, a small village dominated by the steep sided peaks which loom over it. High on the precipices above us were several parties of climbers and we watched as some of them continued their laborious ascent whilst others abseiled back down. It was very hot and we were pleased to find a small shop selling ice creams and cold drinks. After our usual picnic, we drove to the cooler area of Fos de Binies, where a river has cut a deep gorge through the rocks and there were plenty of cool shady areas. We were unable to find the expected Dipper but were quite happy to enjoy a walk along the road, looking down into the turquoise water and admiring the wild flowers and butterflies.

On our final morning, we headed back into the mountains to the pass at Portalet. This area is obviously very popular with skiers and there was evidence of much new building going on. We spent some time studying the wide variety of orchids and gentians on show, before heading off up the slopes in search of Snow Finches. Sadly, for most of us, this became too arduous a trek, but three brave souls persevered and were duly rewarded by the sight of three Snow Finches, high up on the snow line. Meanwhile, the rest of us had sought out the nearest coffee shop! Later we drove up a quiet track and walked through an area which gave us some beautiful views across the mountains. From here, we watched a Lammergeier patrolling over the slopes opposite and first three, then five Honey Buzzards were seen, circling to gain enough height to pass over the barrier of the Pyrenees in order to continue on their migration route.

The following day, we drove to Bilbao Airport and it seemed no time at all until we were back home once again. As well as seeing some exciting and, for many of us, new birds, we had also seen several mammals, including Red and Roe Deer, Red Squirrels and Marmots. Although the butterflies were perhaps not quite as numerous as expected, we saw over twenty species including Green Hairstreak, Moroccan Orange Tip, Spanish Festoon, both forms of Swallowtail and Cleopatra. Of the birds, the highlights for most of us were Eagle Owl, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Lammergeier, Dupont's Lark and Scops Owl. Equally memorable however, were the numerous White Storks nesting on every available space, the Swifts and Lesser Kestrels flying round at Trujillo and the different types of vultures and raptors which appeared overhead throughout the journey, plus the song of the Nightingale which accompanied us throughout.

On behalf of everyone on the trip, special thanks to John for organising the holiday so well (and for arranging such good weather), to Eustace for his unfailing ability to find us those 'special' birds and to both Jim and Eustace for uncomplainingly driving us over 2,000 miles in ten days! It was a great trip and perfect both for exploring some lesser known areas of the beautiful Spanish countryside and for the chance to see some really great birds.

Sue Morton July 2007