

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Extremadura
13 – 20 March 1999

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The group

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Report by Ivan Nethercoat, illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: white storks at Trujillo

As with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the price of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for La Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO), the Spanish Ornithological Society, and its work in Extremadura. During the holiday, Carlota Viada Sauleda of SEO's Madrid office twice came to Trujillo to collect the cheque for £830 from this year's two holidays in Extremadura (£25 per person x 32 plus an extra donation). This was then topped up by further generous contributions when Graham auctioned the spare wine.

This brings the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £4,650, and the total from all Honeyguide holidays to £15,100. A thank-you letter from Carlota appears at the end of this report (but not this web version).

Extremadura
March 13 - 20 1999

A week of warm weather and marvellous birds. However a dry winter meant that many of the flowers were yet to flower. The area had had a very dry winter; some of the plains were very dry, resembling autumn more than spring. The birds did perform well though so everyone was very happy. Keep buying cork!

Ivan

Saturday 13 March - Gatwick to Trujillo

A prompt gathering at Gatwick and onto the plane on time only to be delayed by three passengers (not Honeyguiders) who'd had their luggage transferred but now could not be found. This meant we lost the opportunity to take off at the required time and sat on the runway for an hour waiting for another 'window'. Apart from this all went well except that we were now travelling in darkness so saw nothing of the surrounding countryside on the way to the hotel. So wearily to bed wondering what the new day would bring.

Sunday 14 March - Belén Plain

A gentle start to the day with breakfast at 8 o'clock followed by a short drive through Belén Village and onto the open plains. These areas are declining throughout Europe as agriculture becomes more intensive. The wildlife of the area cannot compete with modern agricultural methods and conservation organisations are working with local farmers and the EU to try to keep these areas farmed traditionally but also to give the farmers a reasonable income.

Our first step was along a fairly non-descript track but full of surprises. Great spotted cuckoos gave us a marvellous flypast, a male subalpine warbler was feeding amongst the Spanish broom while a southern grey shrike used a fence as a hunting post. White storks were all around and three great bustards suddenly appeared, flying over towards the open plains in the distance.

Once out onto the plains we were soon rewarded with some of the specialities of the area as well as the local regulars such as crested larks and Spanish sparrow.

The fields were alive with the songs of corn buntings and larks - and as we got deeper into the plains calandra larks were everywhere, their black underwings and white trailing edge being very distinctive. A quick stop by the side of the road gave everybody good views of larks, black and griffon vultures, red and black kites while in the distance 20+ little bustards took flight shortly followed by a flypast of seven black-bellied sandgrouse.

Surprise birds were two merlins chasing larks over the open grassland. Three little bustards flew and landed allowing us all to get telescope views as they fed in the dry grassland.

Back at Trujillo the day was finished off with a quick visit to the "smelly pond", a small lake near the town, proving a little magnet for migrants. The reeds on the edge gave a feeding area for chiffchaffs and perches for numerous swallows. On the shore and in the water were a small flock of little egrets, five black-winged stilts, snipe, redshank, 36 little grebes and migrant meadow, tree and water pipits. Lesser kestrels were on very good view in the low evening sun.

Monday 15 March - Monfragüe

What a day! Many of the sites demand an early start so breakfast was at 7.30 with an 8.15 departure to one of the best wildlife areas in Europe.

We journeyed into low mountains, passing olive and holm oak groves with fleeting glimpses of azure-winged magpie. First stop was at the Castillo de Monfragüe, a superb viewpoint, today in glorious weather. Hawfinch and rock bunting greeted us on the climb up to the viewpoint, from where we had stunning views of scenery and birds. Here the vultures can be seen rising on nearby thermals before dispersing and drifting past very close at eye level and below. Flocks of 50+ griffon vultures, with a handful of black and a couple of Egyptian vultures, frequently massed in front of us.

The top of Peñafalcon was not only the source of the vultures' thermals but also provided a bush in which two Spanish imperial eagles were perched. A large pale head, big beak and large dark body almost passed for a black vulture at this distance where size becomes very difficult to judge. One bird eventually took to the air showing a distinctive profile and sub-adult plumage. On the way back to the cars, hawfinch, blue rock thrush and red-rumped swallow all gave good views, while by the vans Mundi showed us a large tortoiseshell butterfly - now extinct in the UK.

A short drive to overlook the reservoir and rocks of Peñafalcon added a glorious black stork, fully resplendent in its iridescent green plumage. Rock buntings were seen by some of us very well and the azure-winged magpies proved to be just as elusive as on the drive to the park.

Here we also got a lovely view in the telescope of the unusual nettle-tree butterfly - sole member of its family in Europe. This newly awakened insect was sunning itself before egg laying on what were presumably nettle trees, although being in early bud with no leaves, positive identification was difficult!

A coffee stop at the 'visitor centre' gave us another view of imperial eagle as well as short-toed eagle and a lovely pied wagtail - feeding alongside a more 'normal' white wagtail.

On to lunch overlooking a colony of griffon vultures and a chance for some quick botanising again - *Astragalus lusitanicus* was putting on a good show by the roadside along with its more demure relative from the pea family, *Vicia lutea* the yellow vetch, and French lavender for company.

The cliffs at Tiétar allowed even closer views of resting and nesting griffon vulture as well as a wonderful display of birds of prey. Short-toed eagle, booted eagle, marsh harrier, a flock of 12 black kites and several black vultures, red kite, and Egyptian vulture as well as black stork left us all with sore necks before the drive home. Here too were the glorious hoop petticoat narcissi, tree heath and wonderful delicate narcissus.

The drive home finally allowed us to catch up with azure-winged magpie in fields of holm oak. In the evening sun they spectacularly lived up to their name as a flock of some 15 birds moved through the field allowing us all excellent views. Sharp-eyed Mundi also caught a glimpse of our star bird here when she caught sight of a black-shouldered kite hunting among the olive groves. An earnest search soon found the bird perched on top of the oak in full sunlight. Everyone got excellent views through the telescope of this elusive speciality of the area.

Tuesday 16 March - Valdesalor Plain

Up for our usual 7.30 breakfast and 8.15 departure this time to an area of open plain south of Cáceres. Our 10.00 arrival was greeted by a cool wind to lower the temperature enough to warrant coats in the full sun. This walk took us well off the road into an area of open plain so typical of what makes Extremadura special.

Purple carpets of sand spurrey lined the way as we set off into a still very dry and barren habitat. The area was covered with dried heads of last year's thistles with no sign of new growth. This provided perfect cover for the key birds of the area and food for many more such as goldfinch.

Keith's sharp eyes soon spotted two stone-curlews trying to use the thistle for cover but without success as all got good views in telescopes. The same applied to the little bustards, which also gave us excellent views as they walked off with that 'if I walk quietly maybe they won't see me' look. Northern wheatears joined crested and calandra larks in sheep fields, as did three skylarks.

Farther on we had distant views of three great bustards which kept us going in the full sun. The birds proved wary and were easily spooked and flew out of view, only to reappear with seven companions when most of the party had turned back. Lunch was taken on the plain before a quick stop for coffee and a drive along a quiet road over the plains toward Monfragüe before heading back to Trujillo.

The glorious evening light did not reveal many species but we did get excellent views of calandra larks, Egyptian vulture, cleopatra butterflies, marsh frogs, a disappearing hen harrier and to end the day a close and perfectly lit flock of 50 great bustards for all to see through telescopes. Back to the hotel for a talk from Carlota from SEO.

Wednesday 17 March Monroy and Río Almonte

7.30 for 8.15 and another bright clear day and very hot in the afternoon.

This was a day to explore the back roads and fields on the road to Monroy at the edge of the National Park. The bright morning light was perfect for the route we took and with frequent steps by streams, farms and fields the birds and flowers soon showed well. Catchfly (*Silene*) lined the roadsides and a hummingbird hawkmoth was sunning itself before foraging for nectar in the warming sun.

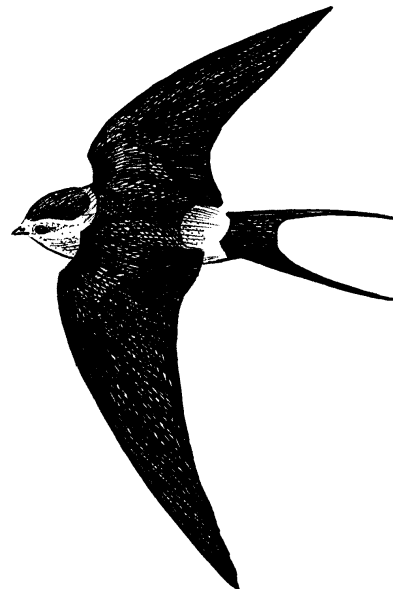
By a small river we were greeted with red-rumped swallows, Cetti's warbler, storks nesting and Sardinian warbler. Over a ridge what appeared to be a buzzard was warming up in the early sun, just the head and shoulders in view. When warm the bird transformed into a black kite as it took off and gave us a lovely flypast! This was soon followed by three great spotted cuckoos, allowing us all to see these birds really well.

Back in the bus to a small rise overlooking fields and within 10 minutes we'd seen a beautiful male hen harrier, buzzard (a real one!) black-shouldered kite, little bustard and of course calandra lark and black vulture!

On to the Río Almonte and a pair of very smart black wheatears, as well as numerous striped-necked terrapins and Egyptian vulture. A welcome café in Monroy not only gave liquid refreshment but also a grandstand view of lesser kestrels hunting over the town.

We lunched with azure-winged magpies and walked down a flower lined track along a stork colony in stone pines. *Silene*, numerous crucifers, *astragalus* and *cistus* lined our route while familiar butterflies such as small copper and small heath flew with the less usual Provence hairstreak. Numerous azure-winged magpies accompanied the route, a pair of black-shouldered kites put on a good show atop a pine tree and male hen harrier cruised overhead.

Back to the Río Almonte, but a different bridge and a chance to unwind and potter in warm evening sunshine. Kingfishers, serin and linnets were seen to a chorus of marsh frogs and clumps of *Narcissus jonquilla*.



Thursday 18 March - Trujillo & Belén

A later start today with an 8 o'clock breakfast before a walk into town. Trujillo is a magical place, full of narrow streets, a bustling market and a castle offering beautiful views over the town and countryside.

From the town, lesser kestrels performed overhead and a walk back to the hotel via the town pond revealed that many of the birds were still around - cattle and little egrets, black-winged stilts and black-tailed godwits all to be seen.

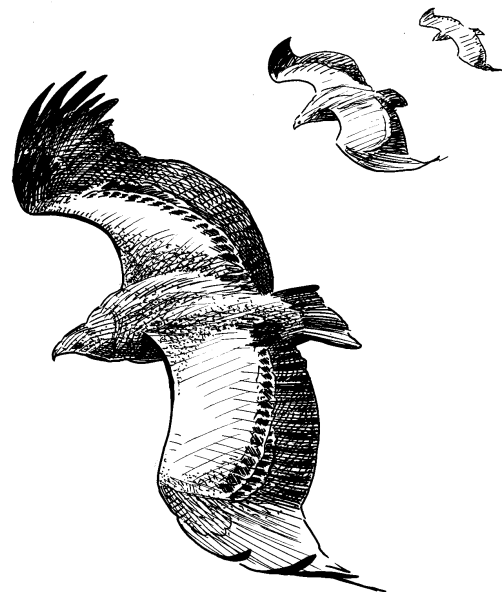
After lunch we drove to the Belén Plain. A small track across the plain gave us all excellent views of great spotted cuckoo and subalpine warbler. As the afternoon wore on the heat increased to a very hot day but while quiet for birds, the delightful Spanish festoon butterfly put on a great view.

Back on the plain the birds stayed quiet until late afternoon when we had the luck to see really good views of some 50 little and 12 great bustards. The great bustards were displaying to everyone's surprise and to finish off the spectacle we had a close flypast and landing of a short-toed eagle.

Back to Spar for some Spanish bargains and our normal meal-time of 8.30.

Friday 19 March - Monfragüe

Our last day and the hot weather continued for a final look at Monfragüe. This was a fiesta weekend and the steps to the Castillo had an ice cream vendor in place by the time we arrived. Here everyone had good views of rock bunting and some very close nesting griffons. The hawfinches were seen by a few members of the party and a black wheatear put in a brief appearance. From the top, the two strange plumaged imperial eagles were in the same bush they occupied last time we visited the site. The vultures were warming up and leaping off the cliffs as we left for Villarreal. Similar birds to our last visit except for a great short-toed treecreeper (looking very similar to ours!) and a surprise flyover of seven cranes! Scarce swallowtail drifted past for us all to see before we made our way to the shade of cork oaks at Tiétar for lunch. A great spotted woodpecker flew over before we saw a possible Bonelli's eagle - soon dismissed as a Spanish imperial as it was joined by an older looking bird to which it started displaying; wings tucked in for great plunging dives and rolls. The bird was a long way from full adult plumage yet seemed well paired up with its partner.



The afternoon was very hot now and the birds quiet so we took a slow drive back to the hotel for showers, beer and packing!

Footnote: recent accounts of Spanish imperial eagle comment on the lack of knowledge of sub-adult plumages. However the strange bird we saw seems likely to have been somewhere between 4 and 5 years old. There is also a record of hybridisation of Spanish imperial and golden eagle.

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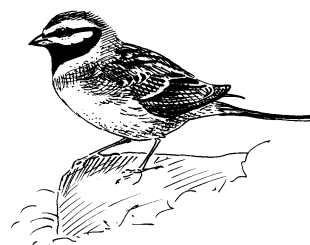
Little grebe	36 Trujillo pond
Great crested grebe	1 seen on Tajo river
Cormorant	c.12 Tajo river
Cattle egret	Flying to/from roost over hotel, 4 Trujillo pond 18/99
Little egret	Río Almonte x 2 6 at Trujillo pond 14/3 14 at Trujillo pond 18/3
Grey heron	odd birds seen throughout, Belén, Tajo
Black stork	c.10 sightings in Monfragüe - Peñafalcon, Tiétar, Embalse de Torrejon
White stork	Numerous in and around Trujillo
Mallard	2, Belén; 2, Monfragüe
Black kite	Seen frequently throughout. Party of 12 over Tiétar on 15/3
Red kite	Seen frequently throughout
Black-shouldered kite	1 seen hunting and perched from road towards Trujillo from Monfragüe 16/3 1 hunting by road to Monroy 1 pair mating in pines between Monroy and Torrejon el Rubio
Egyptian vulture	2 sightings at Peñafalcon, 2, Embalse de Torrejon 2, Tiétar - all adult birds (copulating pair at Tiétar)
Griffon vulture	Numerous (>50 at Peñafalcon 15.3)
Black vulture	Numerous sightings - Belén, Monfragüe
Short-toed eagle	Monfragüe - several sightings Belén Plain - 18/3
Hen harrier	1, Belén 1 male and 1 female on road to Monroy 17/3
Marsh harrier	1 over Tiétar - 15/3
Buzzard	Belén Plain, oak groves on Monfragüe Road, Monroy
Spanish imperial eagle	2 perched on top of Peñafalcon, seen from Castillo on two separate occasions, Monday and Friday, in same bush. 1 over visitor centre, 2 displaying over Tiétar 19/3

Booted eagle	1 dark phase over Tiétar - 15/3 1 pale phase, Valdesalor
Lesser kestrel	Belén Plain Numerous at Trujillo
Kestrel	1, Belén
Merlin	2, Belén Plain 14/3
Peregrine	1, Peñafalcon 1, Embalse de Torrejon
Red-legged partridge	2, Belén
Quail	Valdesalor 1 heard
Moorhen	1, Belén
Coot	2, Trujillo Pond 17/3
Little bustard	33 Belén Plain 14/3 30 + Valdesalor 16/3 46 Belén 18/3
Great bustard	8, Belén 14/3 50+ Valdesalor 12, Belén 18/3
Stone-curlew	2, Valdesalor
Little ringed plover	2, Río Almonte 14/3 8, Trujillo pond 14/3
Golden plover	c.60 Valdesalor 16/3
Lapwing	10, Belén
Redshank	1, Trujillo pond
Snipe	1, Trujillo pond & 1, Belén 14/3
Green sandpiper	2, Trujillo pond 14/3
Black-tailed godwit	x 3, Trujillo pond 15/3 x 4, Trujillo pond 18/3
Common sandpiper	1, Río Almonte
Black-winged stilt	x 5 Trujillo pond 14/3 x 18 Trujillo pond 18/3
Black-headed gull	1, Trujillo pond
Lesser black-backed gull	1, Trujillo pond

Black-bellied sandgrouse	6, Belén Plain 14/3
Rock dove	numerous feral
Woodpigeon	Belén Plain 300 + Peñafalcon
Collared dove	Monfragüe
Great spotted cuckoo	3 Belén Plain 14/3 1 by road to Cáceres 16.3 3 on road to Monroy
Little owl	x 2, Belén 14/3 and 18/3
Swift	over Trujillo
Pallid swift	over Trujillo
Kingfisher	1, Trujillo pond 14/3 1, Valdesalor 16/3 3, Río Almonte 17/3
Hoopoe	frequent
Calandra lark	frequent on plains
Crested lark	frequent throughout
Thekla lark	1, Belén
Woodlark	heard, Belén seen at Belén 18/3
Skylark	3, Valdesalor 16/3
Red-rumped swallow	c.8 at Monfragüe 15/3 4 at Monroy Road 17/3 nesting at Castillo 19/3
House martin	odd birds, Trujillo/Belén
Water pipit	c.3 birds at Trujillo pond
Meadow pipit	c.10 at Trujillo pond c.100 at Valdesalor
Tree pipit	c.3 at Trujillo pond 14/3
Grey wagtail	1, Trujillo pond
White wagtail	Monfragüe (including race <i>yarellii</i>)
Wren	heard Monfragüe seen from road to Monroy

Robin	Monfragüe Valdesalor
Black redstart	Monfragüe Cáceres Plain
Stonechat	Belén & Valdesalor
Northern wheatear	x 3, Valdesalor
Blue rock thrush	Monfragüe, Río Almonte
Blackbird	throughout
Song thrush	Belén, Monfragüe
Mistle thrush	seen frequently in dehesa
Cetti's warbler	Tiétar Cliffs From road to Monroy
Fan-tailed warbler	1, Valdelalor
Subalpine warbler	1, Belén 14/3 and 18/3
Sardinian warbler	1 heard Monfragüe Seen from road to Monroy
Blackcap	1, Monfragüe 1, Valdesalor
Chiffchaff	numerous (in reeds by water especially)
Long-tailed tit	Belén
Blue tit	Monfragüe/Valdesalor
Great tit	Monfragüe
Southern grey shrike	Belén Plain Valdesalor
Jay	Trujillo
Azure-winged magpie	numerous in Dehesa
Magpie	numerous throughout
Chough	Monfragüe, 1 seen
Jackdaw	seen frequently
Carrion crow	outskirts of Trujillo
Raven	Monfragüe

Spotted starling	numerous, flock of, 300 birds on Belén plain
House sparrow	large roost at hotel
Spanish sparrow	Belén Valdesalor Large flock see alongside road to Monroy
Chaffinch	Monfragüe
Serin	Río Almonte Monfragüe
Goldfinch	Belén, 150 at Valdesalor
Linnet	plains flocks of c.50 birds
Hawfinch	Castillo at Monfragüe
Cirl bunting	Castillo at Monfragüe
Rock bunting	Castillo at Monfragüe Peñafalcon
Corn bunting	numerous on plains



Flowers

Hoop petticoat narcissus
Sand crocus
Tree heath
Sand spurrey
Astragalus lusitanicus
Cistus - gum
Cistus - sage-leaved
Narcissus jonquilla
Lygos
Broom

Butterflies

Swallowtail
Small heath
Dappled white
Large tortoiseshell
Nettle tree butterfly
Holly blue
Wall
Clouded yellow
Cleopatra
Small copper
Provence hairstreak
Scarce swallowtail
Speckled wood

Reptiles & amphibians

Wall lizard
Ocellated lizard
Marsh frog
Striped terrapin
Common toad

Mammals

Iberian hare
Rabbit

