

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Extremadura
Colchester Natural History Society
14 – 21 May 2005

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Itinerary

Saturday 14 May: Gatwick to Madrid. EasyJet scheduled flight from London Gatwick arrived Madrid 11.30 am. Minibus to Finca Santa Marta, near Trujillo, about three hours, with break on route for a drink/snack.

Sunday 15 May: Belén Plains and Cabañas del Castillo. Exploration around the Finca Santa Marta before breakfast, followed by a tour across the Belén Plains close to Trujillo, lunch at Rio Almonte, and an afternoon visit to the cliffs at Cabañas del Castillo.

Monday 16 May: Monfragüe Natural Park. Stop at Peña Falcón crags, coffee at Villareal, lunch at Tajadilla with afternoon visit to Portilla del Tietar.

Tuesday 17 May: Zorita Plains, Sierra Brava reservoir and around Madrigalejo. Across the Zorita Plains to the Sierra Brava reservoir. Coffee at Madrigalejo, with rest of day on rice fields around Vegas Altas and Madrigalejo.

Wednesday 18 May: Trujillo, River Tozo and the Belén Plains. Free morning in Trujillo, with time for exploration, shopping and photography. Afternoon walk along Rio Tozo and drive across Belén Plains.

Thursday 19 May: Arroycampo reservoir and Monfragüe. Morning visit to Arroycampo reservoir, drive across to Monfragüe, with lunch on slopes of castle.

Friday 20 May: Jaraicejo, Rio Almonte and Belén Plains. Morning visit to heath at Jaraicejo, drive across to Rio Almonte south of Monroy for lunch, drive back to Trujillo across plains, with late afternoon visit to Belén Plains.

Saturday 21 May: Madrid to Gatwick. Early morning return to Madrid for EasyJet flight to Gatwick.

Participants

Peter and Monica Douch
Ken and Avis Sharpe
David and Sandra Barnard
Brian and Wendy Corben
Ian Parker and Linda Mahon-Daly
Tom Wiseman
Monica Taylor
Brennan and Karin Aunger

Germany

Leaders/drivers

Martin Kelsey
John Partridge

Extremadura
Suffolk

Report by Martin Kelsey, plus contributions on butterflies by Ian Parker and Linda Mahon-Daly and plants by Peter Douch and Monica Taylor

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: Trujillo with white storks.

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. The conservation contribution this year of £25 per person was supplemented by gift aid through the new Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, leading to a total of €575 (£402). During the holiday, Marcelino Cardalliaguet of SEO came to Finca Santa Marta to collect a cheque from this year's holiday in Extremadura. A thank-you letter from SEO appears at the end of this report.

This year's donations, including from another Honeyguide group in Extremadura in March, bring the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £9,885. The total conservation contributions from all Honeyguide holidays was at £33,330 at the end of 2004 and will be in the region of £38,000 by the end of 2005.

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Saturday 14 May: Gatwick to Madrid

The flight from Gatwick arrived at Madrid just ten minutes behind schedule at 11.30 and Martin was waiting to welcome the group as they emerged in the arrivals lounge. Within just a few minutes, John and Martin had sorted out the paperwork for the minibus hire. We loaded up the vehicles and soon were setting off on the journey to Extremadura, first on the circular south of Madrid, thence on the motorway heading south-west from the city. There were just scattered clouds in a blue sky and a pleasant freshness to the breeze. Out of Madrid, we entered the wide agricultural landscape of Castille-La Mancha with the impressive range of the Gredos mountains accompanying us to the north. The landscape looked quite yellow and dry. As Martin explained, poor rains over the previous months had led to a very short spring and already the scenery had a touch of the dry Spanish summer about it. About 80 kilometres out of Madrid, we stopped at a small restaurant for snacks and drinks, most of the group enjoying a filling tortilla (Spanish omelette). We saw the first Spotless Starlings, bringing food to a nest under a roof. Soon after setting off again we had seen White Stork and Black Kite, the numbers of both species increasing as we entered Extremadura. Hills of different shapes rose from the plains and we saw expanses of the oak savannahs or *dehesa*, a habitat maintained by traditional land use for centuries. Groups of Cattle Egrets flew over the road, while a fine Red Kite was also seen.

By late afternoon, we had left the motorway at Trujillo and driven the short distance south-east to Finca Santa Marta. As we entered the car park, a Hoopoe flew up from the lush green lawn into the surrounding olives and Bee-eaters flew overhead calling. Quickly we unloaded the bags and everyone got settled in their rooms, while a welcoming tray of tea and coffee was prepared.

There was an opportunity to rest or to stroll in the beautiful surroundings of the finca before a reception for us, hosted by Henri (the owner of the Finca Santa Marta). Over drinks and tapas, he told us about the history of the place and welcomed us warmly. We then went over to the dining room, a converted olive press, for dinner to the sound of the bill-clacking of the White Storks nesting on the roof of the little chapel next to us.

Sunday 15 May: Belén Plains and Cabañas del Castillo

Most of the group took the advantage of a sunny morning to take a short walk before breakfast along the lane north of the finca. More Hoopoes were seen and a Golden Oriole was heard. The day promised fine weather and after breakfast we assembled in the car park for a quick briefing on the plans for the day from Martin. While we did so, a Honey Buzzard drifted slowly over the finca, heading north-west.

Enthused by this sighting, we headed to the Belén Plains, to the north-east of Trujillo. The finest steppes in Western Europe are found in Extremadura, with globally important populations of birds like Great Bustard. Soon out of the village of Belén, we stopped to look at a very obliging Southern Grey Shrike perched on a wire. Movement in the fields behind us attracted our attention, to reveal two adults and a juvenile Stone-curlew, and a little farther along we stopped to enjoy the spectacle of half a dozen Calandra Larks in song-flight and chasing each other in a field beside the road. Griffon Vultures and a single Black Vulture cruised overhead. At the next stop, Martin scanned a field and found a single male Great Bustard. Despite its distance and the growing heat haze, its bright plumage could be clearly seen, until it moved into some longer vegetation. In order to get a better view, we drove down a track. The Great Bustard was still as far away, but the angle was better. While watching this majestic bird in the 'scope, a male Little Bustard walked into view, its black and white neck markings showing up against the tall vegetation, before it dropped down and effectively disappeared! Short-toed Larks were singing in old ploughed fields beside us and one very obligingly came to drink in a puddle just in front of one of the vehicles. Equally obliging was a female Montagu's Harrier, which quartered the pasture close to the road and later on we saw more, including a male and a melanistic bird.

Stopping to look at a White Stork and Cattle Egret colony in dead trees quite close to the road, we heard the repetitive single-noted song of Zitting Cisticola (= fan-tailed warbler) and picked-up the diminutive bird as it completed its song-flight and returned to perch on a bare stem nearby. In the meantime, a line of Cattle Egrets on the ground below the tree-top colony had been joined by an all-dark bird. This turned out

to be the Northern Bald Ibis that had been present in the area for several months. Everyone was able to see its long decurved red bill and lax crest.

We moved on from the plains and after a brief stop in the village of Aldeacentenera, we had lunch close to a bridge crossing the Rio Almonte. Crag Martins were collecting nest material from damp mud where we parked the cars and a Black Stork drifted overhead while we enjoyed our pack lunches. We then drove up to the pretty village of Cabañas del Castillo, nestled against two impressive crags at the edge of the Villuercus Mountains. From the car park, we spotted a Black Wheatear perched on the roof of the church and minutes later both male and female were perched on a wire fence of a field beside us, along with a Woodchat Shrike. Walking up to the base of the crags we had breathtaking views across the *dehesa* and distant plains to the west and the mountains to the east. A pair of Peregrines entertained us and we saw a small Griffon Vulture chick in a nest on one of the cliff faces. The rocks also provided habitat for Rock Bunting, Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush, while the highlight of our descent to the village was a singing Melodious Warbler.

Via the small town of Madroñera, we returned for tea and biscuits at the finca before preparing ourselves for an evening trip to Trujillo (it being the evening off for the staff at Finca Santa Marta). In the square, Lesser Kestrels built up in number, as birds returning from feeding out over the plains, wheeled and glided over the rooftops. We saw at least one Pallid Swift before repairing to the La Troya restaurant. There we had an excellent dinner of a huge spread of tapas celebrating local delicacies and cuisine. As we emerged from the restaurant, the town square was beautifully lit-up, illuminating the swifts that circled around the church.

Monday 16 May: Monfragüe Natural Park

The day dawned with a much more unsettled prospect with heavy clouds moving from the south-west. Despite this, and last night's late return from Trujillo, many ventured out for the pre-breakfast walk. After breakfast we headed straight for Monfragüe Natural Park, stopping first of all at the impressive cliffs of Peña Falcón. We had magnificent views of Griffon Vultures at their nests, feeding young that already looked like half-size adults. A pale-phase Booted Eagle appeared overhead, as did a very distant Peregrine. We were treated with fine views of Black Storks, gliding in above to soar in front of the rocks, or come to settle on ledges, often giving their far-carrying greeting call as they did so. It was wonderful too to look down onto a Black Stork's nest with a bird sitting.

From Peña Falcón we drove farther into the park, stopping at the visitor's centre at Villareal for coffee and to see the attractively designed exhibition about the wildlife, including a life-size model of a Black Vulture. Setting off again, we stopped to view a pair of distant Bonelli's Eagles with a juvenile, just as a torrential downpour started, so with failing visibility, we drove off again, to stop for lunch at the Mirador de Tajadilla. Sandwiches were eaten in the car to the sound of the wind and rain outside. As the storm passed, we ventured out to the hide overlooking the cliffs on the opposite bank of the river, where bedraggled-looking Griffon Vultures were perched. In the river below were a Little Ringed Plover and two Grey Wagtails.

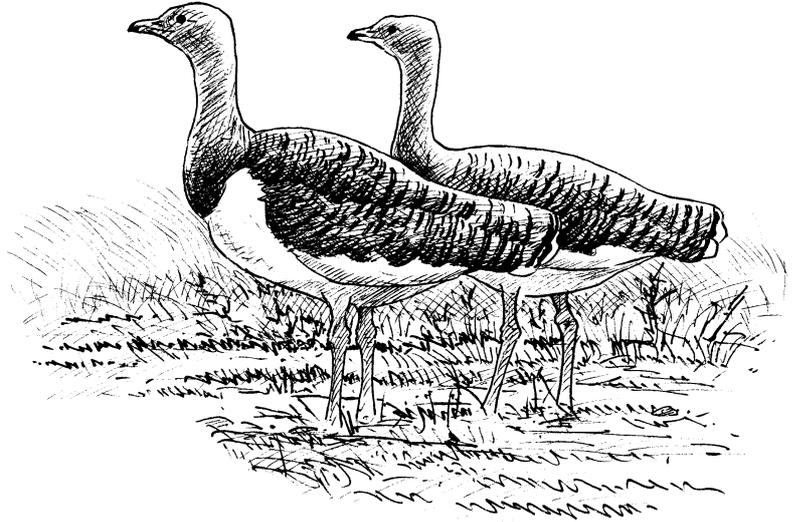
As the weather brightened, we headed for the crags of Portilla del Tietar. Here is a nesting pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles. We quickly found an adult perched on a bare branch near the rocks and had unforgettable views of the bird as it preened and dried its feathers. A couple of times it glided down towards the nest, giving it gruff barking call. Once on the nest it appeared to be feeding the single white downy chick. While the group continued to watch the eagle, John and Martin wandered back along the road to check the cliffs. As dark clouds gathered again and rain started to fall, a movement caught John's eye and checking with a telescope, they found a juvenile Eagle Owl sheltering behind a rock high up the cliff. The group was called and under the cover of the look-out hide, we took turns to look at the owl. While we were watching it, an adult flew in and despite the driving rain, its orange eyes could clearly be seen as it peered around towards us.

As the rain started to cease, we headed back towards Villareal, stopping briefly to see the young Bonelli's Eagle and finding a fine Black-eared Wheatear at the same site. Following a brief break at Villareal, we stopped for a final time at Peña Falcón, watching the Griffon Vultures wheeling over the cliffs.

Tuesday 17 May: Zorita Plains, Sierra Brava reservoir and around Madrigalejo

Following a night of very heavy rain, the day dawned bright and promising. The pre-breakfast walk yielded a sighting of Golden Oriole, as well as a fine Spanish Sparrow and Short-toed Treecreeper. Martin saw a Rock Sparrow as he entered the finca's drive.

We headed to the plains south of Zorita, to try to get better views of both bustards. We were not disappointed. A group of four Great Bustards were found and a fine male Little Bustard was watched at quite close range at the same spot, followed shortly by two rather more distant females. Lesser Kestrels lined up on the fence wires, while overhead a huge feeding flock of Common Swifts, with a few Pallid, passed over. In the field on the other side of the road, was a dead sheep, which already had attracted several Black Kites and a Raven. While we waited, vultures (both Griffon and Black) started to appear, as if out of nowhere, in the sky above. The real spectacle was to follow quickly afterwards as a juvenile Golden Eagle drifted into view at quite low altitude overhead. As we watched, a pair of Montagu's Harriers flew up to mob the eagle and there followed a breathtaking piece of aerial display with the harriers, dwarfed by the eagle, harassing it at very close range and with perfect light for viewing. The Golden Eagle climbed higher and higher and then dropped like a stone to settle, just out of view. We had almost forgotten the vultures with this amazing sight, but they seemed reluctant to settle while we were present, so we then headed to view the reservoir of Sierra Brava. We quickly found two Black-necked Grebes, as well as several Great Crested Grebes, some Coots and a small party of Dunlins.



After a stop for coffee at the outskirts of Madrigalejo, we headed to the rice-fields around Vegas Altas. As we approached, some of us saw a male Marsh Harrier quartering cereal fields beside the road. Stopping to watch Black-winged Stilts near the little village, our attention was drawn to a group of four Spoonbills soaring overhead with some White Storks, the bright sunshine made the plumage a brilliant white, with the wings almost translucent. They were a remarkable sight, and made the storks look almost dowdy by comparison. As we watched them, a Great Reed Warbler sang from a reed-filled ditch.

A lunch stop overlooking over other flooded rice-fields was rather quiet, save for some distant Collared Pratincoles and another Great Reed Warbler. Returning to the main road on a track behind the village we chanced upon a pair of Rollers on the fence beside the road and we were able to watch them at close range, including some courtship feeding behaviour. Nearby a group of Collared Pratincoles were standing in a rice-field, while others hawked insects above them.

We completed the afternoon making a brief visit to rice-fields north of Madrigalejo, where we found a small flock of Gull-billed Terns. Pausing at a bridge over the Rio Ruercus, we listened to Nightingales, Cetti's Warblers, Great Reed Warblers and Melodious Warbler, while along a track a Quail called from the roadside vegetation (in response to a bird farther away) but proved impossible to see. However a smart Tree Sparrow was some compensation for most of us.

Back in the finca, Marcelino from SEO/BirdLife came to give a before-dinner illustrated talk on the birds and habitats of Extremadura and the work done by SEO/BirdLife (the Spanish equivalent of the RSPB) to mitigate the threats to their conservation. We were impressed by the work already achieved by this work. John presented a cheque on behalf of Honeyguide to Marcelino and we heard how previous support from Honeyguide had enabled important surveys to be carried out on the impact of high-tension electricity cables to large birds like Great Bustards. Thanks to these surveys, the electricity company was ensuring that cables through sensitive areas were marked in ways to help birds see them to avoid fatal collisions.

Wednesday 18 May: Trujillo, River Tozo and the Belén Plains

Despite an initial chilly start, the day soon warmed up and it remained sunny and fine all day. The morning was designated for sight-seeing in Trujillo, giving everyone the opportunity to write postcards, tour the castle and do some shopping, as well as watching Common and Pallid Swifts while drinking coffee in the *Plaza Mayor*. The climb to the castle was well worth it for the panoramic views, as well as being able to look across to roof-top stork's nests and a few Lesser Kestrels. After a relaxing morning we headed to the Rio Tozo and a very pleasant walk along to the small reservoir. We were rewarded with finding a Spoonbill there, as well as several pairs of Gadwall, a couple of Shovelers and at least three Booted Eagles, including a dark phase bird which had lost the whole of its tail. Onto the Belén Plains, where upon entering we saw several hundred Griffon Vultures wheeling in the sky, we saw a further group of Griffon Vultures on the ground, around what appeared to be the remains of a sheep. Along with the Griffon Vultures were two Black Vultures, at least four Egyptian Vultures and a Raven. We left the scene as most of the Griffons became airborne again, evidently having had their fill.

Stopping near the stork colony we saw a group of birders looking in the opposite direction to the colony. Following their gaze, we found a Black-shouldered Kite perched on a fence post. Despite some heat haze, it was a good and prolonged view. As we headed closer to Trujillo, Linda spotted 17 Great Bustards close to a fence. By now the heat haze had subsided and we had superb views of this group of males.

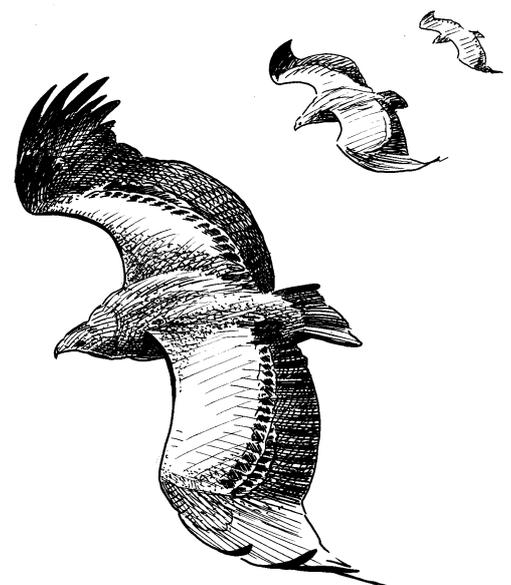
To cap it all a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos was then seen perched on the roadside wire fence, until they were chased away by Magpies. Later, as we were entering the finca, some of the group saw a Rock Sparrow, close to where Martin had seen it on the two previous mornings.

Thursday 19 May: Arroycampo reservoir and Monfragüe

The pre-breakfast walk yielded Rock Sparrow and brief views of a Hawfinch on the track leading to the finca. It was another hot, sunny day and we headed north-east at first, taking the motorway to the wetlands of Arroycampo. We parked at the end of a causeway, with reed-fringed water on either side. One of the first birds seen was a Purple Heron, flying over the reeds and the first bird heard was an exuberant Cetti's Warbler. A distant Savi's Warbler was also singing, its reeling song being quite difficult to pick up among the background sound of insects, traffic and the chatter of Reed Warblers. Luckily we found a much closer Savi's Warbler that was collecting food for nestlings. While standing there, we were delighted to see first a male and then a female Little Bittern fly low over the reeds and also a Squacco Heron. A real Extremadura rarity, a Bearded Tit, occasionally called from the reeds in front of us, but refused to show itself. Eventually we got views of the bird we had been hoping for, the Purple Gallinule (or Purple Swamphen, as it is known now).

After coffee in Saucedilla and a stop to post postcards, we headed down the motorway, taking a turning off for Torrejón el Rubio and Monfragüe Natural Park. The weather could not have contrasted more between today and our first visit to Monfragüe. Under cloudless skies we had lunch in the welcome shade of holm oak trees on the slopes of the castle. We had brief but good views of two White-rumped Swifts from the lunch stop. These were an added bonus, because sometimes they arrive much later in the spring. Climbing up to the castle, we were to have much better views of, at times, up to five White-rumped Swifts. Hawfinches were present on the wooded slopes, as were Chaffinches, while from the castle we were able to look down on passing Griffon Vultures. There were also a few Alpine Swifts and a pale-phase Booted Eagle. But the real highlight was a very obliging Two-tailed Pasha butterfly.

We got back late afternoon to the finca. After dinner, we went to the nearby village of Pago de San Clemente, taking a track up to listen to a rather distant Red-necked Nightjar. Scops Owl and Little Owl were also calling. We then proceeded along another track to listen to the begging calls of a couple of young Long-eared Owls.



They were very persistent and their calling brought in an adult owl (probably a male, given the male hoot that was heard directly before an adult flew into the tree).

Friday 20 May: Jaraicejo, Rio Almonte and Belén Plains

With the weather promising another hot sunny day, we reflected on how different it had been just five days earlier! The pre-breakfast walk was quieter: with spring clearly turning to summer, many birds were now coming to the end of their song periods. After breakfast we headed to the heaths north of Jaraicejo. This is a large heath, glorious in lavender and broom, with a beautiful grove of cork oaks at the end of a small track. We quickly got views of Thekla Larks, with a bird 'scoped to see some of the key features to help separate this from the extremely similar Crested Lark. As we walked across the heath Queen of Spain Fritillaries faithfully kept to their small linear territories, while overhead our second Honey Buzzard of the week flew over. At the edge of the cork oaks, a large warbler flew from an oak into the base of a broom nearby, a female Orphean Warbler. Within minutes we watched a Black Stork drifting eastwards. Entering the stillness of the cork oak grove, initially the only movement seemed to be of a Short-toed Treecreeper. However, soon we came across a group of rather noisy Rock Sparrows, although they proved very hard to see. A Golden Oriole called and was seen flying through the canopy. Back on the heath, a Spotted Fritillary was found and near the road, a pair of Spectacled Warblers were busy bringing in food to young. A rather distant Dartford Warbler sang briefly as we were getting ready to leave.

Just close by, was an area of damper vegetation beside the Arroyo de la Vid. A small Spanish Sparrow colony provided excellent opportunities to watch a male seeking to attract females. We also had good views of a Subalpine Warbler and a Melodious Warbler, both in song close to the lay-by.

After a coffee break in Jaraicejo, we drove across country to Monroy, through sparsely populated *dehesa*. South of Monroy we stopped for lunch on the Rio Almonte. Crag Martins were busy attending their nests under the bridge, young Swallows perched on riverside trees, while overhead three Black Storks, two Short-toed Eagles and a Booted Eagle were seen, along with the regular Black Kites and Griffon Vultures. Following lunch we drove back to Trujillo, stopping on several occasions on the plains to watch Short-toed Eagle, Montagu's Harrier and the fine show of *Retama* broom coming into flower.

At the stop for ice-cream in Trujillo, we elected to make one final visit to Belén Plains, and headed to the small White Stork colony, with stops en route for a close-by male Little Bustard and a fabulously obliging Calandra Lark which was perched on a roadside fencepost and, unlike the norm, seemed not to mind having its photo taken! At the White Stork colony, we checked the fence posts in the area, in vain, for Black-winged Kite, but did get prolonged views of the Northern Bald Ibis, as well as a Little Egret, along with the Cattle Egrets and White Storks

Back at the Finca, we enjoyed a farewell supper and there were votes of thanks to the staff. The highlight was a poem about the trip written and read out by Avis. Henri promised to put a copy of it onto his website.

Saturday 21 May: Madrid to Gatwick

The group assembled at 6.45 am to set off back to Madrid. It was a clear morning and as we skirted the north-western side of the Belén Plains, two Little Bustard males flew over the motorway in their aerial chase. It was like a farewell from such characteristic inhabitants of a site that had been so productive and rewarding for the holiday. After a stop on the outskirts of Madrid to refuel, we arrived at the airport at 10 am, in good time for the check-in formalities for the return flight home.

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Bird Notes by Martin Kelsey

By mid-May, almost all species were well into breeding as spring was turning into summer. Song was abating (indeed the group noticed how much quieter pre-breakfast walks were later in the week compared with the beginning) and many small birds, such as warblers, were getting harder to see. Exceptions to this were relatively late arriving species, like Melodious Warblers. Spring passage migration was apparently over, so we saw no migrant waders or terns, but we were treated by being in time to see the local speciality, White-rumped Swift, which normally starts appearing from mid- to late May.

John led pre-breakfast walks at Finca Santa Marta each morning, while both Martin and John took the group in two minibuses each day as set out in the itinerary above. On return each evening to the finca, the bird and butterfly sightings of the day were logged.

Little Grebe Pairs seen on the small reservoir on Tozo river on 18th May and on small farm ponds on 19th May.

Great Crested Grebe Present on reservoirs: Six on Sierra Brava 17th May, two at Tozo on 18th May and six at Arroycampo 19th May.

Black-necked Grebe Two seen on Sierra Brava reservoir 17th May.

Great Cormorant Three at Arroycampo reservoir on 19th May.

Little Bittern A pair seen at Arroycampo on 19th May.

Squacco Heron Two seen at Arroycampo on 19th May.

Cattle Egret The commonest egret, seen daily in large numbers, especially close to roosts near Trujillo. Over 300 seen on 20th May.

Little Egret Single bird seen at White Stork and egret colony on 20th May at Belén Plains.

Grey Heron Singles seen almost daily, especially along rivers and reservoirs.

Spoonbill Four seen over the rice fields at Vegas Altas on 17th May was one of the most beautiful sightings of the trip. One bird at Tozo Reservoir on 18th May.

Northern Bald Ibis The long-staying bird of unknown origin seen on Belén Plains on 15th and 20th May.

Purple Heron Four at Arroycampo Reservoir on 19th May.

Black Stork: Seen almost daily, with sightings along Almonte River (including three on 20th May) and over Jaraicejo and five birds in Monfragüe on 16th May.

White Stork Seen every day, on nests with young in every town and village, to small flocks foraging on grasshoppers in the fields. Sometimes well over a hundred seen per day.

Gadwall About twenty at Tozo reservoir on 18th May with two nests with eggs found in adjacent pasture.

Mallard Seen daily with pairs on farm ponds.

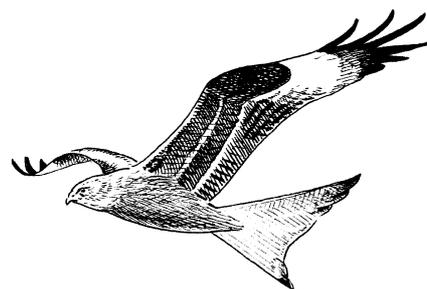
Honey Buzzard One drifting north-west over Finca Santa Marta on 15th May and one over the heaths at Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Black-winged Kite One on fence post early evening 18th May on Belén Plains.

Black Kite Most widespread and second most common raptor, seen every day with over 50 seen most days and over a hundred on 18th May.

Red Kite Seen daily but far fewer than Black Kite, usually as singles over *dehesa*. Maximum of about fifteen on 15th May.

Egyptian Vulture Single figures seen most days, especially at Monfragüe.



Griffon Vulture The commonest raptor with over 200 seen on 18th May and between fifty and a hundred most other days. We witnessed real spectacles at sheep carcasses, as well as nestlings being fed at Cabañas del Castillo and Monfragüe.

Black Vulture Seen daily, usually as singles and pairs, although a total of ten seen on 18th May.

Short-toed Eagle One seen on 16th May over Finca Santa Marta and four on 20th May at Jaraicejo and near Monroy.

Marsh Harrier One over cereal fields at Vegas Altas on 17th May and one at Arroycampo on 19th May.

Montagu's Harrier Seen almost daily, and every time we were in the plains, including ten on 20th May. Sightings included melanistic birds.

Common Buzzard A common and widespread raptor seen every day.

Spanish Imperial Eagle Superb views of adult and chick at nest site in Monfragüe Natural Park on 16th May. A real highlight of the trip, despite the weather!

Golden Eagle The spectacle of an immature Golden Eagle being mobbed by a pair of Montagu's harriers over the plains of Zorita on 17th May was one of the most exciting of the trip.

Booted Eagle Both pale phase and dark phase birds seen almost every day.

Bonelli's Eagle Distant views of two adults and a juvenile in Monfragüe on 16th May.

Lesser Kestrel Seen every day, over the plains and in the skies above the towns. As we arrived in the main square of Trujillo in the evening of 15th May, at least 40 birds returning from forays in the hinterland.

Common Kestrel Outnumbered by Lesser Kestrel, but singles and pairs seen every day, especially along the river valleys.

Peregrine Falcon Fine views of two birds at Cabañas del Castillo on 15th May, with a single at Monfragüe on 16th.

Red-legged Partridge Pairs and singles seen almost every day.

Quail Two calling near Madrigalejo, one within a few metres of us, on 17th May.

Moorhen Over 20 on the rice fields on 17th May and over 10 at Arroycampo on 19th May, otherwise singles.

Purple Swamphen Two seen, eventually quite well, at Arroycampo on 19th May.

Common Coot About 15 at Sierra Brava reservoir on 17th May and six at Arroycampo on 19th May.

Little Bustard Single males seen on Belén Plains on 15th and 20th May, with a male and two females on Zorita Plains on 17th May.

Great Bustard Males seen on Belén Plains on 15th May (one bird) and 18th May (flock of 17). Four on Zorita Plains on 17th May.

Black-winged Stilt As well as pairs regularly seen on large farm pond, over a hundred present scattered over the rice fields at Vegas Altas and Madrigalejo on 17th May.



Stone-curlew A pair with a chick on Belén Plains on 15th May and a pair on Zorita Plains on 17th May.

- Collared Pratincole** About 30 present on the rice fields at Vegas Altas and Madrigalejo on 17th May.
- Little Ringed Plover** One bird on Tajo river in Monfragüe Natural Park, 16th May.
- Gull-billed Tern** Over 20 seen on the rice fields at Vegas Altas and Madrigalejo on 17th May and four at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Black-bellied Sandgrouse** Six seen on Belén Plains on 15th May.
- Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon** Common daily.
- Wood Pigeon** Seen daily in small numbers on pre-breakfast walks and especially in *dehesa*.
- Collared Dove** Seen daily in small numbers.
- Turtle Dove** Singles heard on pre-breakfast walks at Finca Santa Marta on 16th and 17th May.
- Great Spotted Cuckoo** Excellent views of a pair on Belén Plains on 18th May and one at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Common Cuckoo** Seen or heard almost daily.
- Scops Owl** Two heard calling at Finca Santa Marta on evening of 17th May and one at Pago de San Clemente on 19th May, but otherwise very quiet.
- Eagle Owl** Adult and juvenile seen in torrential rain in Monfragüe on 16th May.
- Little Owl** One heard at Pago de San Clemente on 19th May and two seen on fence wires on 20th May, otherwise very quiet.
- Long-eared Owl** One adult seen and juvenile begging calls (“squeaky gate”) heard at Pago de San Clemente on evening 19th May.
- Red-necked Nightjar** Heard at Finca Santa Marta and Pago de San Clemente on 18th and 19th May.
- Alpine Swift** About ten at the cliffs of Cabañas del Castillo on 15th May, with six seen at Monfragüe on both 16th and 19th May.
- Common Swift** Common and widespread.
- Pallid Swift** Small numbers seen around main square in Trujillo on 15th and 18th May, and at least one in large swift flock low over Zorita Plains on 17th May.
- White-rumped Swift** At least six present around the castle at Monfragüe on 19th May.
- Bee-eater** Widespread and seen daily. Up to ten seen around Finca Santa Marta.
- Roller** Two at the rice fields at Vegas Altas on 17th May.
- Hoopoe** Common and widespread. One of the first birds seen on arrival at Finca Santa Marta and always enjoyable to watch.
- Calandra Lark** Seen in good numbers (sometimes over 25 seen) on every visit to open plains. Full of character with singing endlessly.
- Short-toed Lark** Seen at Belén Plains and Zorita Plains in small numbers.
- Crested Lark** Most widespread lark, seen daily (sometimes up to 50 recorded).
- Thekla Lark** About six seen on heath at Jaraicejo on 20th May.

- Woodlark** Seen and heard most mornings at Finca Santa Marta.
- Sand Martin** Two at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Crag Martin** Common, especially near cliffs and bridges across rivers.
- Barn Swallow** Very common and widespread.
- Red-rumped Swallow** Common and widespread.
- House Martin** Very common and widespread.
- Tawny Pipit** One seen at Belén Plains on 15th May.
- Grey Wagtail** One at Cabañas del Castillo on 15th May and two at Monfragüe on 16th May.
- White Wagtail** Singles seen daily, mainly close to rivers.
- Wren** Seen and heard daily around Finca Santa Marta, also at Monfragüe.
- Nightingale** Seen and heard almost daily around Finca Santa Marta and elsewhere.
- Black Redstart** Seen at Cabañas del Castillo and Monfragüe, around crags.
- Stonechat** Common and widespread, seen daily.
- Black-eared Wheatear** One male at Monfragüe on 16th May.
- Black Wheatear** A pair seen at Cabañas del Castillo on 15th May.
- Blue Rock Thrush** Up to six seen each visit to suitable craggy habitat at Cabañas del Castillo and Monfragüe. Superb views of birds perched and in the gliding song-flight.
- Blackbird** Up to ten seen daily around Finca Santa Marta and in wooded habitat elsewhere.
- Mistle Thrush** Singles seen occasionally in wooded habitat.
- Cetti's Warbler** Its explosive song heard at the River Ruercus near Madrigalejo on 17th May and at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Zitting Cisticola** Numbers lower than usual, perhaps because of cold snap in winter, but seen and heard beside rough damp grassland on Belén Plains and the rice fields.
- Savi's Warbler** One birds singing and another feeding young at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Reed Warbler** One feeding along river Tozo on 18th May. Several singing at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Great Reed Warbler** Birds singing in reed-filled ditches on the rice fields at Vegas Altas and along the River Ruercus at Madrigalejo on 17th May. Also at Arroycampo on 19th May.
- Melodious Warbler** Excellent views of one singing at Cabañas del Castillo on 15th May, at Finca Santa Marta and Madrigalejo on 17th May and near Jaraicejo on 20th May.
- Dartford Warbler** One bird briefly in song at Jaraicejo on 20th May.
- Spectacled Warbler** Pair feeding young, with male occasionally in song, at Jaraicejo on 20th May.
- Subalpine Warbler** Singing male at Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Sardinian Warbler Seen daily at Finca Santa Marta.

Orphean Warbler Female seen at edge of cork oak grove at Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Blackcap Birds heard singing at Monfragüe on 16th May and along River Ruercus on 17th May.

Bearded Tit One heard at Arroycampo on 19th May. A local rarity, a male has been present at the site since mid-April.

Long-tailed Tit Six seen at Monfragüe on 16th May.

Blue Tit Common and widespread.

Great Tit Common and widespread.

Nuthatch Recorded on pre-breakfast walks at Finca Santa Marta and in cork oak grove near Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Short-toed Treecreeper Recorded daily at Finca Santa Marta and in wooded habitat elsewhere.

Golden Oriole Heard (and often seen) daily at Finca Santa Marta.

Southern Grey Shrike Seen daily, especially in open habitat, but less common than following species.

Woodchat Shrike Seen daily, widespread.

Jay Singles seen most days in wooded habitat.

Azure-winged Magpie Common and widespread.

Magpie Very common.

Carrion Crow A few birds seen on pre-breakfast walks at Finca Santa Marta on 15th and 16th May.

Jackdaw Common and sometimes in flocks of over a hundred at Trujillo.

Raven Singles or pairs seen daily in open or rocky habitats.

Spotless Starling Very common and widespread.

House Sparrow Very common and widespread.

Spanish Sparrow Seen most days. A fine displaying male watched close to a nest near Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Tree Sparrow Two at rice fields near Madrigalejo on 17th May.

Rock Sparrow Singles at entrance to Finca Santa Marta on three mornings. Family party in cork oak at Jaraicejo on 20th May.

Red Avadavat Small flock of this escaped exotic at rice fields at Madrigalejo on 17th May.

Chaffinch Fairly common and widespread.

Serín Common and widespread.

Greenfinch Singles or pairs seen on four days at Finca Santa Marta.

Goldfinch Common and widespread.

- Linnet** Small numbers seen on three days at Finca Santa Marta.
- Hawfinch** Singles or pairs at Finca Santa Marta on three days and at Monfragüe castle on 19th May.
- Cirl Bunting** Recorded at Monfragüe and near Finca Santa Marta.
- Rock Bunting** Seen in rocky habitat at Cabañas del Castillo and Monfragüe.
- Corn Bunting** Very common and widespread.

Butterflies by Ian Parker and Linda Mahon-Daly

Swallowtail	Meadow Brown
Large White	Small Heath
Small White	Large Heath
Bath White	Small Copper
Clouded Yellow	Sooty Copper
Spanish Purple Hairstreak	Holly Blue
Ilex Hairstreak	Common Blue
Two-tailed Pasha	Blue spp? (two species thought to be Common
Red Admiral	Tiger Blue and Ioalis Blue, though slightly out
Large Tortoiseshell	of their range)
Cardinal	Brown Argus
Southern Marbled White	Dingy Skipper
Spanish Marbled White	Mallow Skipper
Queen of Spain Fritillary	Small Skipper
Spotted Fritillary	Common Skipper

Other Invertebrates

Dragonflies included a Red Damselfly, Emerald Dragonfly sp., Broad-bodied Chaser, Ruddy Darter. Also seen: Egyptian Grasshopper, a Bush Cricket, Rhinoceros Beetle, Glow Worms, Hummingbird Hawk moth, Violet Carpenter Bees, an oil beetle and Mid-wife Spider.

Reptiles and Amphibians

Stripe-necked Terrapin
Moorish Gecko
Midwife Toad sp.

Botanical Notes by Peter Douch and Monica Taylor

Trees

The olive trees, *Olea europaea*, were coming into flower, as were the 'Holm oaks' *Quercus ilex* and *Q. rotundifolia* in the *dehesa* and waysides. The dwarf, scrubby 'Kermes oak' *Q. coccifera* is easily overlooked, but present on most hillsides and even growing out of walls. One specimen only of the Downy oak *Q. pubescens* was seen, in the drive at Finca Santa Marta. The Umbrella pine *Pinus pinea* was the main pine, often planted, but also growing naturally.

The Pinks

The tiny sand spurrey *Spergularia rubra* was one of the most often encountered plants in flower on the sandy soils, another being the papery *Paronychia argentea*, which happily withstands being trod on. A few campions were still in flower, including the attractive *Silene colorata*.

Gorses, brooms and pea family

Most had finished flowering, but the flowers of the yellow 'Retama', *Lygos sphaerocarpa*, came out during the week. One prickly species still in flower on the hills was *Genista hirsuta*. 'Spanish broom', *Spartium junceum*, was in flower, planted along the motorways. The clovers, vetches and allied plants mostly seemed to be in seed and we noticed *Medicago orbicularis* pods. Narrow leaved clover *Trifolium angustifolium* had its last flowers still open lowest in its flowering spike.

Mallows

Malva sylvestris was the most common seen, as in Britain, but small flowered mallow *M. parviflora* was seen and possibly a Cretan mallow *M. cretica* at one rocky site.

Cistus

The only 'rock rose' in flower was the attractive 'Gum Cistus' *C. ladanifer*, with its glistening, sticky aromatic leaf and large white flower, usually with a black central motif.

Umbellifers

There were far fewer umbellifers than we are used to, although wild carrot *Daucus carota* was growing well near the rice fields. Field eryngo, *Eryngium campestre*, a rare plant in Britain, was everywhere in the dry grassland and about to start flowering.

Borages and labiates

The spreading *Anchusa undulata* was at the end of its flowering period and very common, with deep blue flowers at the tips of long shoots. *Ballota hirsuta* was one of the most noticeable plants in the high rocky places, also found on the ramparts at Trujillo, with many flowering shoots, but only tiny flowers in whorls between the felty leaves. The most common labiate was *Lavandula stoechas*, which was in full bloom, dominating the heaths and hillsides, attracting thousands of insects of many species. *Teucrium scorodonia*, our own Wood sage, was also common on the heaths.

Scrophularia family

Mulleins stood out along roadsides and were sometimes very showy, particularly the very tall candelabra-like Hoary mullein *Verbascum pulverentulum*. Others in flower included Dark mullein *V. nigrum*. The very large, woody Antirrhinum with white flowers, which grows out of walls as at Trujillo or on rocks is *A. graniticum*. A small, delicate toadflax, seen in sandy fields and on heaths, where it was probably the food plant for the spotted fritillary butterfly, was possibly *Anarrhinum bellidifolium*. Tall plants of Water speedwell *Veronica anagallis-aquatica* were growing in the Rio Tozo. The Foxglove seen on many roadsides and in rocks was *Digitalis thapsi*. *Bellardia trixago*, an attractive flower was noticed several times in grassy fields, as was the Yellow bartsia *Parentucellia viscosa*, both of which are semi-parasitic plants.

Scabious

The scabious most often seen was most likely *Knautia purpurea*, but the superficially similar but smaller Sheep's bit *Jasione montana* was also noticed.

Thistles and other Asteraceae

Both the 'Milk thistles', which share characteristic white marbling on their leaves, were in flower, *Silybum marianum* and *Galactites tomentosa*. The former is much taller, purple and with a spiny flower head, the latter has an attractive lilac flower without spines. 'Spanish oyster plant' *Scolymus hispanicus*, a yellow thistle of waste ground, came out during the week. The most strange plant of the holiday, which looks like a cactus, was a thistle seen only once in a small group by a roadside, *Onopordum illyricum*.

Other composites flowering included *Manatisalca salmantica*, a centaurea with single purple flowers borne at the end of long individual stems, and 'Spiny chicory' *Cichorium spinosum*, with its brilliant blue flower, but apparently no leaves. However, these were just starting to emerge by the end of the week. *Pallenis spinosa* was only seen around the castle at Monfrague.

Daisies in flower included both Corn marigold, *Chrysanthemum segetum* and Crown daisy, *C. coronaria*. Their golden yellow flowerheads are almost indistinguishable, but *coronaria* has a much more deeply cut leaf. The white Corn chamomile *Chamaemelum nobile* (and possibly others) spotted many fields and roadsides, but the most noticed daisy was *Tolpis barbata*, with its layers of yellow petals and black central spot.

Grasses

Several of the grasses were very familiar, although *Briza maxima* and wild oat *Avena sp.* were more common than they are in Britain, but there were also some very different ones, such as the 'Piggy-back grass' *Aegilops geniculata* and *Arundo donax*, the giant reed, probably sometimes planted.