

# Spain

## Extremadura and La Mancha

Monday 14<sup>th</sup> – Monday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2022

Small group tour led by Fernando Enrique Navarrete



The lagunas of La Mancha are an important stronghold for the endangered White-headed Duck © Stephen Daly/Daly Wildlife

**Limosa's November birdwatching tour to Spain** commences with a five-night stay amid the rugged sierras and rolling steppe grasslands of Extremadura, followed by two nights in Alcazar de San Juan where we explore the tucked away *lagunas* of La Mancha. It is a holiday that will take you from the vulture-filled skies over Peña Falcon, via flocks of bustards, sandgrouse and thousands of wintering Cranes, to the little known rural wetlands of "Don Quixote country" - home to White-headed Ducks, Western Swamphens and even the elusive Moustached Warbler. Escape the onset of winter in the UK and join us for a Spanish birding tour with a difference!

### Highlights

- Five nights in fabulous Extremadura
- The vulture-filled skies of magnificent Monfragüe National Park
- Great and Little Bustards, Black-winged Kite, both sandgrouse, Iberian Magpie, Iberian Grey Shrike
- Thousands of overwintering Common Cranes
- Two nights off the beaten track in La Mancha, exploring the wetlands of "Don Quixote country"
- White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks, Greater Flamingo, Western Swamphen, Iberian Green Woodpecker
- Ruddy Shelduck, Dotterel and Moustached Warbler were among the surprises on our last tour
- Expertly led by Limosa's resident, English-speaking Spanish specialist Fernando Enrique Navarrete

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## What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leader(s)
- 7 nights accommodation in Spain (5 nights in Extremadura, 2 nights in La Mancha)
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, permits, tour-based tips and taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds



Thousands of Common Cranes spend the winter in the fields of Extremadura © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

## Outline Itinerary

### Day 1

Fly to Madrid. Transfer to Extremadura. Night near Trujillo.

### Days 2-5

From our base near historic Trujillo, we explore beautiful Monfragüe National Park and the wild steppes and sierras of Extremadura. Four further nights near Trujillo.

### Days 6-7

We head east to discover the rural wetlands of sleepy La Mancha. Two nights at Alcazar de San Juan.

### Day 8

After a morning enjoying the wetlands, we return to Madrid. Fly back to the UK.

## Tour Overview

Limosa's November birdwatching tour to the 'wild heart of Spain' offers the perfect excuse to leave the UK at the onset of winter for some great birding in Central Spain with our English-speaking expert guide **Fernando Enrique Navarrete**.

Starting on the rolling steppes and rugged sierras of Extremadura expect to see Hoopoes flapping across the *dehesas* on zebra-striped wings, tawny autumnal grasslands dotted with groups of stately Great Bustards, squadrons of Black and Griffon Vultures floating silently in the sky above the immense rock pinnacle of Peña Falcon and thrill at the spectacle of thousands of Common Cranes which have arrived here from Northern Europe to winter beneath the oak trees and feed in the harvested fields of maize and rice.

From Madrid, we head west to the wonderful birding country of Extremadura where we stay in a very pleasant *Casa Rural* which is only a few miles from the historic town of Trujillo. With good home cooking (and some of the produce coming from the owners' "ecological vegetable garden"), this will be our comfortable base for the first five nights of the holiday.

Visits to magnificent Monfragüe National Park form the centrepiece of our stay in Extremadura - one of Limosa's all-time favourite places. Birds of prey are more numerous here than anywhere else in Western Europe and we will look for the scarce Black-winged Kite, immense Black and Griffon Vultures and up to three species of eagle: Bonelli's, Golden and the endemic Spanish Imperial.

This is also an excellent time to see the solitary Iberian Grey Shrike and exotic Iberian (Azure-winged) Magpie, two Iberian specialities that make their home in the beautiful *dehesa* woodlands that ring this national park.



The classic view of Great Bustards, as a group crests a hill on the lookout for 'trouble' © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

Out on the rolling plains, flocks of Calandra Larks and droves of bustards - both Great and Little - will already have come together for the winter.

As we scan the fields for them, we may be lucky to unearth secretive Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse as well as wintering parties of Stone-curlews which could even include birds from the UK!

During our stay, we will almost certainly pay a short visit to the historic hilltop town of Trujillo, enjoying far-reaching views from the medieval battlements and a refreshing beer at a cafe in the cobbled *Plaza Mayor*, watched over by the formidable statue of Francisco Pizarro, conqueror of Peru.

Leaving Extremadura, we loop north and east beyond Toledo, where the *lagunas* (lakes) of La Mancha lie scattered like confetti across the rolling rural heartland of Spain. We spend two nights in this sleepy 'backwater' in a hotel nestling in a landscape made famous by Cervantes' classic novel *Don Quixote*.

The wetlands in this infrequently visited part of Spain are important for the threatened White-headed Duck, plus a fine array of waterbirds in winter that can include hundreds of Greater Flamingos, Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Black-necked Grebe, Western Swamphen and, with a little luck, the tricky Moustached Warbler.

Limosa has been operating a wide-ranging annual programme of birdwatching tours to Spain since 1990. **Fernando Enrique Navarrete** joined the Limosa team back in 2014 and is our English-speaking Spanish specialist. He has excellent experience of Central Spain, having lived, birded and led tours in both Extremadura and La Mancha including our November 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 holidays to this region.

Our late autumn days on this fantastic trip are usually sunny, always memorable, and filled with more birds than you could wish for; so join us as we return for another exciting and refreshingly different birdwatching tour to Spain, discovering the land of the Conquistadores and Cervantes' fictional hero, Don Quixote!

## Daily Itinerary

### Day 1

#### FLY TO MADRID, ONWARDS TO MONFRAGUE

Our November birdwatching tour to Spain begins with a morning flight to Madrid, where Fernando will be waiting to meet us. We head west towards the rolling steppe grasslands, beautiful oak woodlands and rugged sierras of Extremadura which truly is the 'wild heart of Spain'.

The journey will take around three hours, but we will stop along the way to potentially have a first look for the elusive Black-winged Kite. Although it is late autumn, the prospect of also seeing birds such as White Stork and Hoopoe will come as a welcome surprise.

Early evening arrival at our comfortable rural retreat, a small, privately-owned country house hotel set amidst wonderful birding country just a few miles from the medieval hilltop town of Trujillo. Nearby, Cattle Egrets, Spanish Sparrows, Spotless Starlings and Common Waxbills forage in the fields, and exotic Iberian Magpies (Azure-winged Magpie in 'old money') regularly gather to roost. *Night Casa Rural El Recuerdo*

### Days 2-5

#### MONFRAGUE NATIONAL PARK, THE STEPPE AND SIERRAS OF EXTREMADURA

To begin our exploration of this lovely region we only have to take a short walk outside, as over 125 species have been recorded within a matter of minutes of our *Casa Rural*. We might hear the eerie cries of Stone-curlew drifting over the steppe, the dry rattle of a Cirl Bunting from the hillside or see birds of prey soaring effortlessly overhead scanning for their next meal.

North from Trujillo, our route to Monfragüe National Park passes through mile after mile of *dehesas*, a park-like habitat of cork and evergreen oaks, foraged by pigs and alive with the ceaseless chatter of Iberian Magpies. Sardinian Warblers scold us from the brush and smart Iberian Grey Shrikes perch like sentries beside the road, while the squat form of a Little Owl glares down at us from one of the massive 'erratics' that are so characteristic of this part of Extremadura.

This is probably the richest spot in Europe for birds of prey. As the immense shapes of Griffon Vultures launch themselves from sun-warmed crags to patrol the sweeping skies, we will be on the look out for Red Kite, Peregrine and three special eagles: Bonelli's, Golden and the endemic and rare Spanish Imperial Eagles, all of which are resident in the park. With luck, we might even come across a huge Eurasian Eagle Owl, out sunning itself on a favoured ledge.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse © Fernando Enrique Navarrete



As well as the larger Great Bustard, we will hope to find Little Bustard during our holiday © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

Always magical, Monfragüe's *Cistus*-covered hillsides and deep plunging valleys are rich in small birds. Crested and Thekla Larks, Dartford Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Rock Bunting and Red-billed Chough are all likely and we could also find Crag Martin, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper.

To the south of Monfragüe, our attention will turn to the sweeping plains, a vital stronghold of the spectacular Great Bustard, which gather into flocks (or 'droves') at this time of year and we should also see the declining Little Bustard. Another special bird here is the Black-winged Kite, as winter is arguably the best time of year to see this oft-elusive bird of prey.

We will listen out for the distinctive Pochard-like calls of nomadic Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and the telltale 'chuckling' of Black-bellied Sandgrouse passing over the steppe. As we scour the fields for these, flocks of Calandra and Skylarks, Spanish Sparrows, Corn Buntings, finches and pipits may be put to flight by the sudden appearance of a low-flying Hen Harrier or a dashing Merlin, both of which are winter visitors to this region.

By November, thousands of stately Common Cranes will have arrived from northern Europe to feast on fallen acorns as well as the glut of spilled food left behind in the region's harvested fields of maize and rice. They make a stirring sight and sound and are, undoubtedly, one of the highlights of any late autumn visit to Extremadura!

Finally, no visit to this wonderful region would be complete without enjoying a short stroll through historic Trujillo town, with its winding cobbled streets, delightful medieval architecture and mellow pan-tiled roofs. We will make a short sightseeing visit to admire the glorious views across the plains from atop the medieval battlements and afterwards dropping back down to the beautiful *Plaza Mayor*, with its imposing statue of the Conquistador Francisco Pizarro mounted on horseback. Even in autumn, a few White Storks are likely to be attending their rooftop nests in town. *Four further nights at Casa Rural El Recuerdo*

### Days 6-7

#### LA MANCHA: WETLANDS AND LAGUNAS

After breakfast, we bid farewell to our hosts and set off eastwards across Extremadura to Toledo, the provincial capital of neighbouring Castilla-La Mancha. Our destination is Alcazar de San Juan, a small country town in the sleepy rural backwater of La Mancha. It is a longish drive, but we will pause along the way to enjoy a couple of choice wetland sites, where sightings of Western Swamphen, Spoonbill, Great Egret, Bluethroat and Penduline Tit have been among highlights from our last three visits here.

Like so much of Spain's vast central plain or *meseta*, the open and undulating landscape of La Mancha is relatively sparsely populated.

Scattered here and there amongst the patchwork of cereal fields and vines are numerous shallow lakes or *lagunas*. Some are reed-fringed freshwater habitats bursting with activity, whilst others are saline, sterile and seemingly devoid of life. Yet each holds its own fascinating population of birds.

Of major importance is La Mancha's thriving population of rare White-headed Ducks, the males with their extraordinary sky-blue bills swollen like a prizefighter's nose! In November, we should also find hundreds of Red-crested Pochards and Greater Flamingos here too, along with Black-necked Grebe, Western Swamphen and good chances of the rare Ferruginous Duck.

Marsh Harriers sail low across the autumnal reedbeds and Hen Harrier is also possible. We should hear the pig-like squealing of Water Rails (though actually getting to see one is another matter entirely!) and the 'pinging' of Bearded Tits, while Cetti's Warblers call loudly as we pass by the waterside tangles and tamarisks. Zitting Cisticolas frequent the drier margins and, if the gods are smiling, we might even encounter the very localised Moustached Warbler here - our 2017, 2018 and 2019 groups were all lucky!

Eight 'out-of-season' Whiskered Terns put on a surprise showing for our 2018 group, and we plan to visit an impressive winter roost site that on our 2019 tour produced more than 900 White Storks and 90+ Marsh Harriers! Other species to watch for in La Mancha include Bluethroat, Water Pipit and the endemic Iberian Green Woodpecker.

Although intensively cropped, La Mancha's arid, stony, steppe-derived farmland still supports a surprising variety of dry country birds. In November, we could come across Calandra and Crested Larks, Stone-curlew and both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse as we travel between one wetland site and the next. *Two nights at Alcazar de San Juan*

### Day 8

#### RETURN TO MADRID, FLY TO THE UK

We have time this morning to enjoy more of La Mancha's varied winter birding, with further chances to look for White-headed Duck and the prospect of waders such as Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover and Little Stint. Two Ruddy Shelducks were a late and unexpected addition to our trip list on our November 2019 tour!

Our birding over, reluctantly we must return to Madrid and check-in for our late afternoon flight back to the UK, where our autumn birdwatching tour to Spain concludes.



Moustached Warbler is never an easy bird to find, but our last three visits here have all been lucky © Fernando Enrique Navarrete



Little Owl enjoying the late afternoon sunshine © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

## Trip Information

**Group Size** Maximum of 7 participants and 1 leader or 12 participants and 2 leaders

**Birds** 120-140 species

**Accommodation** 7 nights accommodation in Spain, staying at two delightful and perfectly situated hotels in central Spain.

We spend the first 5 nights in Extremadura, staying at lovely *Casa Rural El Recuerdo*, a small and beautifully renovated country house hotel which is just a few miles from Trujillo.

From there we travel to La Mancha for a 2-night stay near the provincial town of Alcazar de San Juan. All rooms have private facilities.

**Meals** All main meals are included in the tour price, commencing with a light *tapas* lunch on Day 1 and concluding with lunch on Day 8.

Delicious home-cooking at the first hotel (*El Recuerdo*). Breakfasts and evening meals will be at the hotels. Lunches will be a mixture of picnics and light cafe lunches.

**Walking** Easy, short walks. In Extremadura, one uphill walk followed by a steep climb up a series of stone steps to reach the viewpoint overlooking the heart of Monfragüe National Park is optional (and may not be offered on every trip). The landscape in La Mancha is gentler with easy walks over predominantly level terrain.

Wear comfortable walking shoes or lightweight boots, with sturdy corrugated soles for grip.

**Weather** The weather in Extremadura in late autumn is typically warm and sunny, 12-20C (54-68F). It can be chilly first thing with the occasional ground frost possible at this season. Some rainfall or showers are likely, so be sure to pack some warm and weatherproof clothing.

**Flights** Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all international flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors (Sacha Barbato) who will be able to advise you on which flights we are recommending for each holiday and he will be able to book these for you.

Whilst our recommended flight will be from London, flights from other UK regional airports may also be possible for those wishing to travel from nearer to home and Sacha will be able to advise you on the options.

**Ground Transport** By minibus.

### Tour Cost

#### **2022 (8 days):**

Land only cost: £1895

Single supplement: £395

Deposit: £500

#### **Cost includes**

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 7 nights accommodation in Extremadura and La Mancha
- All main meals
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips and taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds

#### **Cost excludes**

International flights, insurance, drinks, airport and in-flight meals and snacks and other items of a personal nature.

### About Your Guide

**Fernando Enrique Navarrete** Fernando is our resident Spanish expert bird tour guide, all-round naturalist and biologist whose home is at Algeciras overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar.

As a child, he was fascinated by the flocks of raptors that formed above his home and being born close to Europe's most important bird migration route, helped shape his love of birds and nature. At 18, Fernando became one of the youngest bird-ringers in Spain, while his eagerness to learn about more and more species led him to travel widely in Europe, Africa, Asia and Central America.

He has also worked on projects with Montagu's Harriers, Lesser Kestrels, Griffon Vultures and White Storks as well as studying the effects of wind farms on birds.

### What You Say...

*"This was my first experience of a guided European birding tour and I absolutely loved it - definitely looking forward to going again. A real highlight was watching all the birds, including over 500 White Storks, coming into roost in La Mancha."*

#### **GM, Spain (EX & La Mancha) tour**

*"Fernando worked very hard and did an excellent job as tour guide."*

#### **AdSC, Spain (EX & La Mancha) tour**

### How To Enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a “confirmed departure”, our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

### Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

***Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.***