

Spain

Spanish Steppes in Winter

Sun 22nd – Sat 28th January 2017



Trip photos (clockwise, from top left): Griffon Vultures in formation at Monfrague • Magnificent Great Bustard • Sentinel Southern Grey Shrike • White-spotted Bluethroat in the wetlands • Griffon and Cinereous Vultures at a deer carcass • Eurasian Spoonbills overhead © participant Roger Cresswell & tour leader, Fernando Enrique

**report compiled by tour leader:
Fernando Enrique**

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Tour leader: Fernando Enrique

with Chris Achard & Carrie Piggott, David Adams, Roger & Chrissie Cresswell, Angela McSorley and Nigel Turnbull

Sunday 22 January

After a trouble-free flight, the group arrived on time at Madrid Airport. With luggage collection completed and after a brief introduction, we hit the open road, destination Extremadura, skirting Madrid in the light traffic of a Sunday afternoon. Red Kites, Common Buzzard and Common Kestrel were common along the road, while the sunny conditions provided excellent thermals for the numerous White Storks. We stopped for an enjoyable 'tapas' style lunch en route before reaching Arrocampo for some more serious birding later in the afternoon. The visitor center was already closed when we arrived, so we decided to walk along the edge of the reservoir. In the reedbeds we found our first Western Swamphen of the trip, a big flock of Cattle Egrets, several Penduline Tits calling, a couple of Kingfishers and our only Dunnock of the trip.

We boarded the buses once more seeing our first Iberian Magpies before arriving at the hotel close to Trujillo in the heart of Extremadura. A lovely dinner was taken and we retired early as most had been up very early that morning.

Monday 23 January

Clear skies and low temperatures greeted us today, although the temperature increased throughout the day. It doesn't get light until around 8am in Extremadura in January so we weren't able to have a pre-breakfast walk, despite the activity of birds outside the hotel. Once we got out, we realized that the place was full of Iberian Magpies, Song Thrushes, Serins and Sardinian Warblers, amongst other birds. After an excellent breakfast we headed towards the plains between Trujillo and Caceres, one of the best preserved grasslands in Europe and home to one of the healthiest populations of bustards and sandgrouse in Spain. The first thing we found when we arrived at the plains was a small flock of Great Bustards, but scanning the fields around them we found at least 15 Little Bustards, allowing direct comparison with their much bigger cousins. Other birds observed included several Thekla Larks, our first of many Iberian Grey Shrikes, Calandra Larks displaying and hundreds of Lapwings and Golden Plovers.

Navigating through the numerous tracks in the area we managed to find a few more Great Bustards, up to 20 Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a similar number of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, a male Hen Harrier and our first Griffon and Cinereous Vultures of the trip. After a very productive morning we stopped for a picnic lunch at Rio Almonte near Santa Marta, where we found several Crag Martins, Grey Wagtails and more vultures. After that we drove through Santa Marta de Magasca and beyond to the plains. Once again patient waiting and observing paid dividends when a couple of Great Bustards were spotted. We stopped several times along the road, scanning the plains in search of more steppe birds. During one of these stops we found a Little Owl sitting on a rock by the road. But suddenly we realized that on the other side of the road there was a flock of at least 120 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse feeding on the ground and providing excellent views. After such an amazing first full day, we drove back to our hotel for another lovely dinner and a deserved rest.

Tuesday 24 January

After another excellent breakfast and with a promising weather forecast ahead of us, we visited Monfragüe National Park. Monfragüe is without any doubt the flagship of natural Extremadura. The national park encompasses a series of low, rocky hills along the Tagus River, with remnant of dense Mediterranean forest on its north-facing slopes. And is also the place with the highest density of breeding raptors in Europe. For example, there are more than 400 pairs of Griffon Vulture and this area holds the largest Cinereous Vulture colony on Earth, with over 300 pairs. Since the temperatures were so low near Peña Falcon, we decided to climb up towards the castle in order to warm up a bit. From the castle tower the views and birdlife are stunning. The vultures were so low that the photographers of the group were taking amazing pictures of the raptors flying at eye-level or even below us.

After a while - and with warmer temperatures - we decided to visit again one of the most popular spots in Monfragüe, Peña Falcón. Our first stop here produced hundreds of Griffon Vultures, dozens of Cinereous Vultures, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Serin, Crag Martin and superb views of several Firecrests and Short-toed Treecreeper. With the day slipping by, we drove on further into the park. We made a quick comfort stop at Villareal de San Carlos, but just half a mile before we arrived we found a dead deer very close to the road, with at least 50 Griffons and a dozen Cinereous Vultures fighting to get the best position on the table.

What an amazing sighting, it really was like being on safari in Africa! After that, we stopped for lunch at a small picnic site by the river. At Portilla del Tietar we had one of the highlights of the trip, as we watched an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle sitting on top of the highest rock, with the other of the local pair flying amongst the abundant vultures and providing excellent views.

Finally reaching the northern edge of the national park, our target here was the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a very localized bird in the region. We didn't have to wait long, though as, just a minute after our arrival, a nice male landed on a nearby tree and provided excellent 'scope views. Reluctantly, we left this wonderful spot and headed back to our hotel after a fantastic day, stopping one last time to see the Spanish Eagle.

Wednesday 25 January

Today we awoke to a chilly but clear morning, as in previous days. Our first stop was the Alcollarín reservoir, a brand new reservoir that attracts thousands of duck and other water birds during the winter. The first serious stop was at the dam, where a scan of the reservoir revealed thousands of birds in all directions. We decided to get a bit closer so we followed the road around the reservoir, stopping at several places that allowed us to scan the different parts of the reservoir. The number of ducks and grebes was almost overwhelming; thousands of Mallard and Shoveler, hundreds of Teal and Wigeon and smaller numbers of Tufted Duck, Pochard, Greylag Geese and Black-necked Grebe were noted. The little lake on the north edge of the reservoir was very productive, with a female Ferruginous Duck amongst dozens of Tufted Ducks and Common Pochards, a totally unexpected Squacco Heron and amazing views of several Kingfishers. In addition to all these waterbirds, one of the best birds of the day was an adult Bonelli's Eagle perched on a rock.

We were running out of time, so we decided to pay a visit to the plains near Campo Lugar, one of the best places to watch Great Bustards in Extremadura. A small detour to a couple of isolated ponds rewarded us with great views of four Spoonbills, one of them ringed in The Netherlands. A bit further along the road we managed to find a minimum of 43 Great Bustards plus a nice array of other grassland birds and good numbers of raptors, including several Hen Harriers, lots of Marsh Harriers and one Peregrine. Another male Great Bustard was found and, very close to it, a small group of Little Bustards was seen feeding and providing great views. After so much excitement we decided to call it a day and we headed back to give ourselves time to get cleaned up and to head into Trujillo for a wonderful Extremaduran meal.

Thursday 26 January

A cold and frosty start soon cleared as the sun rose and we drove to the Sierra Brava reservoir. Since most of the birds were closer to the dam, we decided to head that way and when we arrived at the dam the number of ducks was mind-blowing; thousands of them, mostly Shovelers and Mallards, along with smaller numbers of Teal. There were also good numbers of Great Crested Grebe and gulls. Soon, the cold temperatures made us retreat to a warmer spot and, with this in mind, we visited a sheltered spot further south which is also a traditional roost site for Stone-curlews. As soon as we arrived we found a group of 15 birds in the open, allowing us excellent 'scope views.

After such a wonderful encounter, we paid a visit to the rice and maize fields near Madrigalejo, where thousands of Cranes spend the winter every year. Cranes seemed to be everywhere, with a conservative estimate of 5,000 birds around Vegas Altas alone. Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails were plentiful, as were buzzy groups of Common Waxbills and Red Avadavats. A nice surprise was a flock of 14 Great Bustards feeding on the ground plus a smaller group flying over the rice paddies. We spent our afternoon around the Finca Moheda Alta reserve, where a fine mix of dehesa and rice fields gave us some excellent birding. Amongst the huge numbers of cranes we found two adults and a juvenile Black Stork - a scarce species at this time of the year - Great Egrets and several Hen Harriers, including fantastic views of an adult male hunting Spanish Sparrows. Other birds in this area included several White Storks, lots of Common Waxbills and big flocks of Red Avadavats.

We stopped one last time at Rio Gargaligas in search of Penduline Tits to no avail. Although several Water Rails calling from the reeds were a nice addition. Reluctantly, we left this wonderful spot and headed back to our hotel, in order to attend a lovely wine tasting session imparted by Juan Pedro.

Friday 27 January

A dull start greeted us today with showers throughout the day. Despite the weather conditions, our intrepid group arrived at Belen plains early in the morning, since some local birders reported not one but two Great Spotted Cuckoos, the first birds of the season. We looked very hard for them, but to no avail, probably because of the weather. However, we did find two small flocks of Great Bustards, lots of Serins and several Sardinian Warblers. Our next stop was Embalse de Arrocampo a large, reed-fringed reservoir complete with hides and a small visitor centre. We drove on to stop at the first roadside hide at the lake, with a brief drive to collect a key

from the visitor centre quickly allowing us access to it. Despite poor weather, birds almost immediately seen included Grey Heron and Western Swamphen, with others added to our list that included at least five Spoonbills, two Great Egrets and several Penduline Tits calling from the reeds with a nice male providing fantastic 'scope views. The rain stopped and we decided to have lunch near hide number 2, which proved to be a great move. Right in front of us a male and later a female Bluethroat showed extremely well. We enjoyed fantastic views of these birds for several minutes, one of them was even ringed and we almost read the number of the ring - they were very close indeed!

Our next target bird was the Black-winged Kite. There are several pairs breeding in this area, but at this time of the year they can be tricky to find. After a couple of hours looking for them we gave up, but in the last minute we spotted a bird flying along the road carrying a small prey item. We jumped out of the car when the bird landed on a dead tree, allowing excellent scope views. Pheeeeew, just in time! After such a fantastic encounter, we visited again the plains near Belen. Although we tried very hard, we couldn't find any Great Spotted Cuckoos. The number of Great Bustards in the area had increased since our first visit and we counted 16 of these magnificent birds before calling it a day and heading back to our hotel.

Saturday 28 January

Yesterday's rain had cleared the area and we awoke to a chilly but clear morning. We only had limited time this morning, so after saying goodbye to our wonderful hosts, Juan Pedro and Belen, we left this lovely corner of Extremadura and hit the road, destination Madrid. We stopped a couple of time along the way and the first stop was very productive, with nice 'scope views of a male Black Wheatear, a territorial pair of Spanish Eagles and lots of vultures of both species. Not bad for a quick stop! The second stop gave us the opportunity to enjoy again a beautiful Black-winged Kite on its favorite perch plus cracking views of Western Swamphen, Hoopoe, Bluethroat and a few other waterbirds at the reservoir. We were running out of time, so we had a quick lunch and reluctantly continued on our way.

Successfully navigating Madrid we arrived at the airport with ample time to say our farewells and relax before the flight back to the UK and the end of a very enjoyable and successful trip to Extremadura. Thanks to all party members for such good humour, enthusiasm and some exceptional birding skills too! I look forward to seeing you all again on another Limosa tour very soon!

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED (120 species)

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Seen on most wetlands with up to 120 noted at Alcollarin.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

At least eight birds noted at Alcollarin.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Common. Seen on most wetlands.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Several dozen at Alcollarin.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Very common and widespread. Seen on most wetlands.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

One of the most abundant birds of the trips. Several thousand noted.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Very common. Noted on most wetlands.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Noted on most wetlands.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

One female seen on 25th.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Small numbers noted on several dates, especially at Alcollarin.

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Small numbers seen or heard on most days in Extremadura.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Common on most wetlands

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Common at Embalse de Sierra Brava and Alcollarín.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Small numbers at Alcollarín.

Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*

Three birds at Moheda Alta on 26th.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Common. Seen on most days.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Four birds near Campo Lugar, two adults near Vegas Altas and at least 4 adults and a juvenile in Arrocampo.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Very common, seen daily

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Seen on most wetlands and rivers

Great Egret *Egretta alba*

Small numbers of overwintering birds on most wetlands.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

Totally unexpected. One bird seen at Alcollarín.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Common, seen on most wetlands

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Common on most wetlands. A flock of +150 birds at Monfragüe on 24th.

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*

Excellent views of one bird feeding near Almaraz on 27th and one bird in Arrocampo on 28th.

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Very common, seen daily. Huge numbers in Monfragüe.

Cinereous (Black) Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Common, seen daily. Good numbers in Monfragüe.

Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*

Two adult birds showed very well at Portilla del Tietar on 24th and another pair on 28th.

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata*

An adult bird sitting on a rock near Alcollarín.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

A couple of birds seen en route.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common on most wetlands.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Two adult males and two females on 23rd, two males on 25th and single birds on 26th and 27th.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Common. Seen on most days

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

A few birds seen on most days

Great Bustard *Otis tarda*

A total of 109 birds were seen on four dates.

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*

Despite the decline in numbers of this species, we managed to find at least 26 birds.

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Seen or heard on most wetlands.

Western Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*

Several seen at Arrocampo where the species is fairly common.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Seen on most wetlands

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Seen on most wetlands

Common Crane *Grus grus*

A major feature of the holiday, with wonderful views and sounds of these birds on a daily basis.

Especially common near Vegas Altas, where several thousand were noted feeding on the rice fields.

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*

At least 15 birds were seen at a traditional roosting site on 26th.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Two pairs were note on two dates.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

One of the most common birds of the trip. Seen everywhere!

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Very common, seen daily.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Seen on most wetlands. Very common in Arrocampo with a flock of 33 birds.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

A single birds seen on 23rd.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Small numbers seen on most wetlands.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Seen on several dates.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Common. Seen daily.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Common. Seen daily.

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*

Up to 140 birds noted on the plains near Trujillo.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*

At least 25-30 birds seen in our visit to the plains near Trujillo plus a couple seen near Campo Lugar.

Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Seen daily

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Common throughout the trip

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Seen daily

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Two birds seen near Trujillo on 23rd.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Seen on most wetlands.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Common. Seen daily.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dryobates minor*

Fantastic views of a territorial male in Monfragüe on 24th.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

One bird on the last day of the tour.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Common, seen almost daily.

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*

Single birds seen at Monfragüe and near Campo Lugar.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Small numbers seen daily.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Small numbers seen almost daily

Iberian Magpie *Cyanopica cooki*

Winter flocks of this bird can be impressive and on at least a couple of occasions we watched parties of 30 or so birds trailing through the oaks near our hotel.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Very common. Seen daily

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Common, seen almost daily

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

One or two birds almost daily

European Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Common

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Heard at most wetlands and finally seen at Arrocampo, where we enjoyed fantastic scope views of a male.

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

A flock of 10-12 birds seen on 25th.

- Eurasian Skylark** *Alauda arvensis*
Good numbers seen on most days.
- Thekla Lark** *Galerida theklae*
Seen almost daily.
- Crested Lark** *Galerida cristata*
Common, seen daily
- Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha calandra*
Very common.
- Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*
Several birds seen near Alcollarín and Moheda Alta-
- Eurasian Crag Martin** *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
Common. Seen daily
- Common House Martin** *Delichon urbicum*
Several birds seen near Alcollarín and Zorita.
- Cetti's Warbler** *Cettia cetti*
Heard almost daily with a few birds seen
- Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus*
Small flocks seen on several dates.
- Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita*
Very common. Seen daily.
- Zitting Cisticola** *Cisticola juncidis*
Seen daily
- Eurasian Blackcap** *Sylvia atricapilla*
Common
- Dartford Warbler** *Sylva undata*
Common. Seen or heard on most days.
- Sardinian Warbler** *Sylvia melanocephala*
The most common warbler of the trip, seen daily
- Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapilla*
Excellent views of several birds at Monfragüe
- Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*
Heard and seen on most dates
- Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europaeus*
Several seen at Monfragüe
- Short-toed Treecreeper** *Certhia brachydactyla*
A few seen very well at Monfragüe and near our hotel.
- Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*
Very common. Seen daily.
- Spotless Starling** *Sturnus unicolor*
Very common, seen daily
- Common Blackbird** *Turdus merula*
Common
- Song Thrush** *Turdus philomelos*
Seen on most mornings around our hotel in Extremadura.
- Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus*
A few birds seen in Monfragüe and near Alcollarín.
- Eurasian Robin** *Erithacus rubecula*
Common
- Bluethroat** *Luscinia svecica*
One bird near Vegas Altas on 26th and two females and a male gave amazing views at Arrocampo on 27th.
- Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros*
Common, seen daily
- Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitaria*
Common in Monfragüe
- European Stonechat** *Saxicola rubicola*
Very common. Seen daily
- Black Wheatear** *Oenanthe leucura*
One male at a regular location on the last day.
- House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*
Very common.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

Very common with flocks of several hundred near Trujillo and around the rice fields.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Several birds seen in mixed flocks with other sparrows.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

Very common around Vegas Altas and Moheda Alta, also seen at Arrocampo.

Red Avadavat *Amandava amandava*

Very common around Vegas Altas and Moheda Alta.

Dunnoek *Prunella modularis*

One bird seen at Arrocampo on the first day.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

One or two birds seen daily.

White Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Very common. Seen daily.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Very common. Seen daily.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Fantastic views of a bird feeding along with several Meadow Pipits which provided an excellent comparison.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common in forested areas

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

Cracking views of a bird feeding in front of our hotel.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

One bird seen in front of our hotel.

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

Common. Seen almost daily.

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Common, seen daily.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Common, seen daily.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Common, seen daily.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Common, seen daily.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Several birds seen at the rice fields near Vegas

BUTTERFLIES**Western Bath White** *Pontia daplidice***Small White** *Pieris rapae***MAMMALS****Red Deer** *Cervus elaphus***European Rabbit** *Oryctolagus cuniculus*