

Spain: Birding and Nature Tour | April 23 – May 5, 2024 | Trip Report | by Carlos Sanchez



With tour leader Carlos Sanchez, local guides Manuel Morales and Vicente Malagon, and 8 participants: Eddie, Carol, Kerri, Kristin, Charles and Marcie H., Christine, and Charles H.



Tues., Apr. 23

Laguna de el Campillo | Cerro Yezosa

After the previous night's dinner at the hotel restaurant, we enjoyed a not too early start today in Madrid before packing up for our drive to Almagro. We stopped at Laguna de el Campillo en route to Almagro, one of several disjunct national park sites in the outskirts of Madrid, for our first introductory birding. We spotted our first Great Tit, Blue Tit, Common Nightingale, and Short-toed Treecreeper in the wooded thickets by the road, while the large lake held Great Crested Grebe and Great Cormorant. The sheer cliffs rising to our left had quite a few Rock Sparrow. Here, we enjoyed our only scope views of the magnificent Eurasian Eagle-Owl. Continuing onwards, we stopped at the famous windmills that inspired Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, before reaching Almagro in time for lunch.

After checking in at our hotel, we visited Cerro Yezosa on the outskirts of Almagro. Red poppies and yellow mustard blanketed the slopes of this low volcanic plug, providing habitat for Great Spotted Cuckoo. We also observed Thekla's Lark, Black Wheatear, and Red-billed Chough in the rocky scree.

Wed., Apr. 24 **Calatrava Steppes | Castillo Calatrava la Nueva**

Today, we drove to the nearby Calatrava Steppes in the early morning. The steppes are one of the most endangered habitats in all of Spain. Unfortunately, due to the modernization of agriculture, the Spanish steppes have largely been converted to fields of wheat and other grains. However, near Almagro, there are still areas of steppe habitat mixed in with more traditional farming methods which harbor an interesting selection of birds. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Little Owl, Iberian Gray Shrike, Whinchat, and Corn Bunting all made appearances. However, the great highlight of the morning was observing a flock of Great Bustard – wow!

After lunch a short siesta, we drove to Castillo Calatrava La Nueva. This medieval castle sits high on a ridge overlooking the Spanish countryside. Due to its rocky nature, it is home to several pairs of Black Wheatear, Eurasian Crag-Martin, Rock Bunting, and Blue Rock-Thrush. We celebrated a fantastic day in Spain that evening after seeing such a fantastic variety of charismatic birds.

Thurs., Apr. 25 **Tablas de Daimiel National Park | Laguna de Navaseca**

Tablas de Daimiel National Park was the main feature of our last full day of birding in Spain, a critically important remnant of floodplain wetland. Despite being Spain's smallest national park, it boasts over 80 species of breeding bird. The park features a series of trails and boardwalks allowing access to its various habitats. Although the reeds had been severely cut back recently, we still managed to observe good numbers of rare and local waterfowl such as Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, and Marbled Duck. Both Common Reed-Warbler and Great Reed-Warbler were defending territories in the patches of reeds that did remain. Black-winged Stilt and Western Yellow Wagtail stuck to the areas of shallow water near open mud or short grass. Islands of low Mediterranean woodland dotted the landscape, hosting a different subset of birds. We spotted migrant Garden Warbler, European Pied Flycatcher, and Spotted Flycatcher in the tamarisks.

In the afternoon, we explored one of the saline lakes that dot the plains of Castilla-La Mancha. In spring, these ponds are very busy with the commotion of thousands of nesting waterbirds. Activity never ceases all day long! A casual walk around Laguna de Navaseca, one of the richest and most diverse in the region, yielded nearly fifty species including several dozen endangered White-headed Duck, as well as Greater Flamingo, Eurasian Spoonbill, Eared Grebe, Collared Pratincole, Pied Avocet and scores of other ducks, shorebirds, terns, gulls, grebes, and reed-warblers.

Fri., Apr. 26 **Calzada de Caltrava | drive to Donana National Park**

We visited an area of Mediterranean woodland called Calzada de Caltrava in the early morning hours, where we managed to find a single Hawfinch that offered good views to all after some effort.

Afterwards, we began to head southwest towards the town of Villamanrique de la Condesa in Andalusia. About half-way through our journey, we made a stop near the center of Cordoba to enjoy the Mosque-Cathedral (la Mezquita) and shop for some of the best olive oil in the world as souvenirs. We arrived late at our lodge Ardea Purpurea, where our local guide was waiting for us and joined us for another memorable multi-course meal.

Sat., Apr. 27 **Dehesa de Abajo | Donana National Park**

Donana National Park, one of the largest and most important wetlands in Europe, encompasses thousands of acres of marshes (marismas) at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River. We started our full day pre-breakfast at Dehesa Tornero. This cork-oak woodland harbors a well-known and healthy population of Iberian Lynx. We walked around for about an hour on this cool and crisp morning, seeing quite a few birds ranging from Black Kite to Common Cuckoo. We also saw many of the lynx's favorite prey item – the European Rabbit. Unfortunately, we did not see the cat that morning!

After breakfast back at Ardea Purpurea Lodge, we drove to Dehesa de Abajo, a popular weekend getaway for families from Sevilla and beyond. A large nearby lake held large concentrations of waterfowl, and we set up our scopes to see what treasures we could observe right after lunch. Among the many Common and Red-crested Pochard, we spotted several White-headed Duck and Marbled Teal – always excellent to see! This is one of the rarest ducks in all of Europe and the Middle East. On our leisurely walk back, we encountered Booted Eagle, European Bee-eater, and White Stork. The fields were awash with the color of wildflowers.

After a nice lunch, we explored more of Donana National Park by vehicle to cover more ground. The ditches and canals held many roosting birds hiding from the midday sun, including Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and quite a few European Turtle-Dove – an increasingly rare species due to hunting on passage in North Africa. At night, we walked just outside of Ardea Purpurea Lodge where we saw Red-necked Nightjar and heard (not seen well) Tawny Owl.

Sun., Apr. 28 **El Rocio, Palacio del Acebron | Flamenco**

After breakfast, we headed to La Rocina Visitor Center of Donana National Park and a new habitat for us to explore – Andalusian ponds surrounded by riparian thickets and ancient stone pines. We had a lot of success with songbirds here, including Iberian Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe, Long-tailed Tit, Dartford Warbler, and Short-toed Treecreeper. The mild Mediterranean climate is also conducive to some interesting flora, and we got to see Mediterranean Fan Palm (the only palm native to Europe), European Royal Fern (closest living relative grows in the eastern USA), and Lusitanian Bellflower among others. Continuing onwards, we visited a similar habitat at Palacio del Acebron where we had incredible views of Iberian Chiffchaff, Eurasian Wryneck, and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

We had time for lunch and some exploration of the town of El Rocio, Spain's strangest town. Several trip participants paid a visit to the Hermitage of El Rocio, the destination site for an annual pilgrimage that brings together roughly a million people each year to venerate the Virgin of El Rocio. After lunch, we headed back out to Sevilla to enjoy a night of Flamenco, the traditional dance of the region. As we watched the lively performers, we noted the many layers of history and cultural influence in Spain reflected in this dance, from Arabic to Jewish to Romany to western European. We had a grand time!

Mon., Apr. 29 **Los Palacios y Villafranca | Trebujena | Salinas de Bonanza**

This morning, we visited the eastern side of the Guadalquivir River. Our first stop was Los Palacios y Villafranca. We had fantastic views of the migratory European Turtle-Dove, one of the world's most rapidly declining dove species due to rampant and intense hunting pressure in North Africa. The tamarisks lining the lake here are also home to the localized Western Olivaceous Warbler, and we managed to have great views of this secretive species. Further south, we visited the vineyards of Trebujena famous for its sherry wine, where we had excellent views of the highly local Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin.

We reached the Playa del Montijo just in time for low tide, and our careful scanning of the sandy shore rewarded us with sightings of Eurasian Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit, Audouin's Gull, Little Tern, Caspian Tern, Common Ringed Plover, and more. After seeing the colony of Little Swift in the port of Chipiona and a delicious seafood-themed meal in town, we stopped at the Salinas de Bonanza. Salt is still extracted from seawater in this complex using traditional methods, providing habitat for a variety of shorebirds such as Slender-billed Gull, Pied Avocet, and Greater Flamingo.

Tues., Apr. 30 **drive to Caceres**

Our time in Andalusia had come to an end, as we continued our journey – this time north towards the city of Caceres in the region of Extremadura. Just north of Sevilla, our local guide Manuel Morales knew of a special site where we got excellent views of both Eurasian Thick-knee and Little Bustard.

Wed., May 1 **Llanos de Caceres**

Today, we made the short drive to the Llanos de Caceres. Here, we spotted several very colorful European Roller sitting on the wires. These crow-like blue birds were nesting in artificial nest boxes right by the road! In the distance, we spotted the impressive Short-toed Snake-Eagle with its large, forward facing eyes. Larks were aplenty, and we saw four different species: Greater Short-toed, Calandra, Thekla's, and Crested. As the sun rose higher in the sky, we visited an area of low growing heath and cork-oak woodland where we had excellent views of Western Orphean, Spectacled, and Dartford Warbler.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch at the Hermitage of Risco on the Sierra de Fuentes with spectacular views of the steppes and the city of Caceres below us. This low series of mountains rises only about 1,500 feet above sea level and provides excellent raptor viewing. We saw Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Common Buzzard, Black Kite, and Cinereous Vulture during our rather windy time there. After our late picnic lunch, we headed down to our resort lodging for an easy evening. Some tour participants chose to relax in the spa amenities!

Thurs., May 2 **Monfrague National Park**

Today was a very special day, since we were visiting Monfrague National Park. This park features a park-like woodland of cork and evergreen oaks (called *dehesa*), as a result of centuries of traditional, low-intensive farming. The ruins of an ancient castle form the centerpiece of the park, overlooking a sheer cliff that functions as a massive eyrie for hundreds of raptors. Formalized as a national park in May 2007, Monfrague National Park harbors the largest collection of raptors in both numbers and diversity in all of Europe!

We started our visit at Salto del Gitano, overlooking a majestic eyrie with hundreds of raptors: Cinereous Vulture, Eurasian Griffon, Booted Eagle, and Black Kite! We also saw our first Egyptian Vultures, striking white raptors with long, wedge-shaped tails. Nature documentaries often show them using small rocks to open ostrich eggs in Africa! Another wonderful sighting was a Eurasian Wren singing out on an open branch, a bird made famous in Western literature due to its long, melodic, and complex song phrases.

Later, we paid a visit to the tourist town of Villareal de San Carlos, where we enjoyed some mid-morning coffee and walked several trails meandering through a mosaic of heathland, Mediterranean woodland, and rocky scree. We had excellent views of Alpine Swift and Western Subalpine Warbler to add to our growing trip list.

Our full day of birding at Monfrague National Park seemed to come to an end too soon. However, before exiting the park on our way back to Caceres, we stopped once again at Salto de Gitano to enjoy the view from Castillo del Monfrague. Both Cinereous Vulture and Eurasian Griffon often flew right at eye level from this vantage point.

Fri., May 3 **Arrocampo Reservoir | Gredos**

The Arrocampo Reservoir, the only major body of water for many miles in the region, was our first stop today as we made our way to the higher mountains. Here, we saw a great variety of very local resident birds, including some specialties that had eluded us elsewhere such as Savi's Warbler, Water Rail, and Little Bittern.

Soon, we were just below tree line at El Parador, our lodging for the next two nights. Although sitting at only about 4,000 feet in elevation, the weather here remains noticeably cooler than elsewhere on our route. After reaching our lovely lodge and washing up, we were soon exploring a grove of pine trees right below the lodge.

Birds came steadily, with lots of excitement as each species revealed itself for us to enjoy – Coal and Crested Tit, Goldcrest and Firecrest, and European Pied Flycatcher, European Robin and Eurasian Blackcap.

Sat., May 4 Gredos

It was a very cool and crisp morning, and it took a little while for birds to get moving. The Gredos happens to be an important meeting zone between birds of cooler northwestern Europe and the Mediterranean. Classic European birds such as European Robin, Garden Warbler, and Coal Tit reach the southern limit of their breeding range in this section of Spain!

We started our day nearby at a mountain park often used by local picnickers. Birding at this park is always very productive, and we saw Greater Whitethroat, Wood Lark, Red Kite, and White-throated Dipper among others.

Later in the morning, we headed to the Plataforma of the Sierra de Gredos Regional Park. This area protects alpine scree and meadows, providing wonderful hiking opportunities for both tourists and locals alike. Herds of habituated Iberian Ibex roam the mountainsides, and we got to enjoy individuals of all age groups, including some older males with spectacular sweeping horns.

Alpine meadows in Europe are home to a cool assortment of birds in late spring and summer. It did not take long for us to have great views of Dunnock and Ortolan Bunting hopping around large boulders. Areas of short grass held Northern Wheatear and Eurasian Skylark. After a moderate hike and some searching, we also connected briefly with a male Bluethroat singing away in an area of broom. The dramatic and magical landscape of these mountains left a great impression on our group – one of their favorite sites of the tour.

A nearby birding lodge also happens to have a beautiful feeder setup with glass panes separating the viewer from normally shy birds, and we sat for a while enjoying many of these classic European birds such as Crested Tit, Eurasian Jay, and Great Spotted Woodpecker – the photographic opportunities were out of this world!

Sun., May 5 Departures

We made our way back to Madrid to catch connecting flights back home and elsewhere. We said farewell at Adolfo Suarez Madrid-Baraja International Airport, full of memories of an incredible wildlife and cultural experience in Spain!

Photos: European Bee-eater (Pieter Verheij), Greater Flamingo (Pieter Verheij), Great Spotted Woodpecker (Carlos Sanchez), Spanish Festoon (Carlos Sanchez), Common Kingfisher (Tom Dove)